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Of Concepts, Coconuts, and the Blood of Christ

The day I turned forty-seven I decided I would get myself a job. I didn't want to be fifty and unemployed. I wanted to start the second half of my life as a bloody professional. Life goals.

And that is how it all bloody started.

But every time I applied to a job, they asked me two bloody questions. One, what were you doing all this time, and two, what qualifications have you got. Well, walking around the house reading all the bloody newspapers, and collecting fallen coconuts on the estate didn't add much to being a promising candidate. So, all I ever got were bloody smiles – either sarcastic smirks or sympathetic lines drawn across their bloody up-tight faces glowing with the scintillation of everything they had which I did not. What to do, so. They didn't understand I wasn't there for the bloody money. Money, I got from the estate. Not much, but how much money does a bachelor want for a monthly supply of rice, vegetables, beef, and Chivas Regal Extra? And an occasional Old Arrack, because after all we have to respect the fact that we are bloody island folk! So, when none of these worked, I went to my school for help. I told the Rector I could be a bookkeeper or a librarian or a typist. The fellow stared at me with an expressionless face for a couple of minutes and I knew he was thinking about the donation my parents made to build the colossal gymnasium some time back, even though it is currently used for a different purpose, to hold mass. He finally nodded. I tell you his sigh was rather a sigh of relief.

I was to be his speechwriter. Not bad, hna?

And for three years, I wrote him speeches – speeches to be delivered at the General Assemblies, College Feasts, Independence Day celebrations, year-end talent shows, what not! How many speeches must I have written, my God! The fellow was excellent in giving sermons so I thought my job would be easier, but good heavens, it was not. I've got to tell you, these priests, they don't understand everyone doesn't want to go to heaven, that some of us are okay with going to hell.

In this manner, by day I was his speechwriter, but you know what? By night, I was his herald of amrita. The Rector sure loved the blood of Jesus, there's no bloody argument there, but sometimes the man needed his not-quite-holy spirit. You know what I mean, no? So, I would bring him a bottle of *Grant's* or *Bacardi* in my leather satchel and put it in his locker and he would leave the money in the locker the next day. Not bad, hna? I however always tried to get *Teacher's* because the name looked a little relevant to the man and made me feel a little less guilty. But you see, if you ask me why I felt guilty, I don't bloody know. Who is to say this is wrong, hna? Anyone who can go for a month without a sip of bittersweet sunshine can cast the first bloody stone. Well folks, that is why God created all the bloody grapes and the corn and the wheat and the barley and even the coconuts before he created the man. Because those needed time for fermentation! You people have been reading the Bible your entire lives and never got that? Bloody loons of the first grade.

Here, so anyhow, I was settled there and was minding my own bloody business. For the College English Day, the Zonal Director of Education was supposed to attend as the Chief Guest. Not bad, hna? Since it is not every day a person who is not a bloody priest gets invited to a Catholic school as the Chief Guest, I wrote the Rector a mind-blowing speech over a fine glass of scotch on the rocks, and he delivered it with poise, I give him that – well, probably with the power of scotch on the rocks as well. You know the fellow no. So, you see, when the Zonal Director of Education in his speech mentioned on and on about the Rector's impressive statement, *what if all the schools in the country were parts of the same school*, who knew he was bloody serious men, really. Since the biggest lies in the world are always the ones told over the mics, I just thought this was one of those things. I mean come on, for St. Andrew's sake, you know I'm right.

The next thing I know, I had to write a bloody speech for the Zonal Director of Education, to be delivered at the Provincial Department of Education. Saying what? What if all the bloody schools in the country were parts of the same bloody school! And I did. It came out bloody fantastic like a lamprais soaked in oil, hot from the oven, yes, because it was also written over a drink of Chivas Regal. Well, that's the wonder of the creation when it is fermented.

So, one Thursday evening as I came back to the house after collecting fallen coconuts on the estate, my landline rang. I don't get many calls you know. Tecla, Mr. Abeyratne's unmarried sister, is the one who used to ring the landline nine out of ten times to ask in creative ways, when I was planning to get married. I used to distract the woman all the time talking either

about her love cake which tasted like crap, or her homemade king coconut wine which tasted like piss. But after she was dead and gone, it has mostly been the bloody Sri Lanka Telecom who called me.

‘Hello! Mr. Harold de Soyza?’

‘Speaking’

‘I’m calling from the Department of Education, Colombo. The Provincial Director of Education would like to meet you. He is quite busy these days but there’s an available time slot in his diary tomorrow evening. How does tomorrow 4 p.m. sound?’ the voice asked. Well, they had already made all the bloody decisions and planned everything so I only had to say yes. It’s not like I had to check my bloody diary or anything no.

When I told the Rector about it, he said ‘God bless you, Harold’.

‘Well, looks like that’s all he’s been doing lately, Father’ I replied but there was no response from the other side. I’m used to that. The fellow is bloody scared of going to hell. So much for drinking the blood of Jesus.

So, I met the Provincial Director of Education in a fancy conference room. My God, the décor. There were two serious-looking officers including the Zonal Director of Education and a sorry-looking non-officer who probably wanted to go catch the bloody staff bus which was leaving in a few minutes. Poor sod.

He asked me about my Concept. Well, I didn’t tell him that the reason behind this whole idea was the thought that there would be less issues if all of these bloody schools were just one school. Don’t tell me you don’t get me now. Look here, we have nine provinces, no? Eight or nine? Nine, yes, nine. Do we have a competition where each province tries to be the best province? No, no. Nobody gives a damn. So, I thought what if all the schools were like that? No competition for results or for talents or for what so ever. Look at these kids, men! Working hard like mad cows. Sin, no! So, if my idea is to work, the kids would be finally free. Not bad, hna, my plan? Alright now I am no genius, I don’t know the first thing about education, you may think my idea is only better than the piece of pumpkin currently rotting in the vegetable basket of my fridge, but I mean, come on! For St. Andrew’s sake I had a point. But if you think I’m a bloody fool, in my defence, after a few glasses of Chivas Regal I was in paradise, I was not thinking straight! But the Provincial Director of Education calls it a

bloody Concept now, hna? So, I cleared my throat and told him that this Concept is based on equality. Not bad, hna? Equality. I tell you equality is one hell of a word. You mention equality and everyone starts taking you seriously.

Just like that, I walked out of the Department with an assignment. A speech for the Provincial Director of Education which was to be delivered at the Ministry of Education, elaborating my Concept. What else were you expecting, I had become a bloody speechwriter.

As for the school, the proposal to build a new building for the library (the name of which was already decided as *The Vatican*), was passed with one hundred percent financial aid. Not bad, hna? A little Rome in Colombo. That's all we lacked no. Bloody height of madness. Anyway, I didn't walk around the Department saying that, instead, I gave everyone a very pleased smile and walked back home on foot. Also, the College Brass Band got to perform at the Provincial English Day celebrations. Not bad, hna?

'Thanks be to God!' said the Rector.

Now now I was a little disappointed. 'What about Harold?'

And that is what led me to the bloody Ministry.

As I entered the auditorium, I could see a line of faces hung on the walls close to the ceiling. My God, the audacity! Some fellows looked as if they were carrying the weight of the mass of stinking foul water in Beira Lake. Some buggers had on their bloody faces the smirks I used to often get a few years ago. The others indeed had Education written all over them. You know what I mean, no? And they were in Chinese collared national costumes and all. Puh!

Here, so speaking of attire, as I sat down, I slowly pushed the serviette next to the glass of water a little away because it was the same bloody design of my red and white checked shirt. My God, wasn't it embarrassing!

In this meeting, there were eight people at the conference table, me and seven others. They were introduced as this Secretary and that Secretary, well you see, I was not paying attention, so I just nodded. There were two bloody Professors and several from education related institutes – which I again can't remember because I was not paying attention. I was pushing

the bloody serviette away and away until it finally fell off the table. Ah! All glory to St. Andrew!

Then they played on screen the speech delivered by the Provincial Director of Education. We listened to the entire speech. My God, the bugger was a dimwit! He had repeated the speech I wrote for him word to word. Stupid stupid man. The Rector would never have done that. He would always add a little, *even Jesus our Lord preached so, and because we are all God's children*, to the speech and spice it up a bit. Also, you see, I know my English is not perfect. The Rector says I confuse simple past and present perfect all the time. So, he bloody corrects them as he delivers the speech. But this Provincial Director of Education was no Rector. My God, he was in fact a parrot. But thanks be to God, nobody saw it a problem. Once the bloody video came to an end, the Secretary looked at me with a proud face so I knew everything was alright. All glory to St. Andrew.

'Brilliant, Mr. Harold, just brilliant' he said and I removed my newsboy cap to show him some respect. Also, my newly dyed hair. Don't you come to judge me now, this new dye cost me a fortune.

Then the Professors started deconstructing my bloody Concept. The heads of the institutes tried to add a pragmatic touch to it. Some kind of Secretary opened a humongous file and read out a bloody circular. Or an Act. Or a Statue. Something like that. Now now don't scold me, these are what I picked up from the bloody conversation. However, while they were trying to intellectualize my Concept, I was thinking about the fallen coconuts the Senanayakes' maid Gunawathie would steal from my estate that evening. The ammandi stole them yesterday also because I was at school writing a last-minute speech for the Rector.

'Aiyo mahaththaya! Long time no coconuts, no?' I could hear the woman telling me the next day. Machiavellian shrew.

The tea was shape, but it could have done with a little condensed milk. You see it is no milk tea if it is not thick and creamy enough to give you cholesterol. But the egg roll was bloody hot and crispy. I was given tissues because my serviette was missing. And as I was eating, drinking, wiping my hands, they argued. They bloody argued and argued.

Clusters. Central government. Education reforms. National policy. These are some of the words that were thrown across the bloody table like carrom discs on a well powdered carrom

board. My God, the tension! They squabbled. They locked horns. They scolded the previous governments. Also, the smirking faces in national costumes looking down at us from the walls – God bless their souls. In the end, after the third round of tea was served and a peon discovered my serviette under the table, they all agreed on one thing: National School of Sri Lanka. Huh!

So, they were to write some kind of bloody paper. And I was to write the Secretary a speech for an upcoming event where the Chief Guest was going to be the Minister. Not bad, hna?

Hence, the second glass of Chivas Regal on my desk. What to do so, the heart wants what it wants, no?

Well, I tell you I was conscious of my grammar because just like that other dimwit I knew this bugger was going to read every bloody thing I wrote word to word as well. Bloody halfwits in big big chairs. He had that kind of a face you know. For St. Andrew's sake the last thing I wanted was the bugger to be humiliated on National Media. He treated me well, no. So, as I was writing his speech, among hundred and one things that came to my mind, was what fermented fantasy he liked. Probably Gold Label. Not bad, hna? Or Chivas Regal eighteen years. My God! These were bloody expensive people.

And that's the story behind how I got in here. Inside this bloody Prado smelling like a temple.

Today morning as I closed the gate behind me, two men in white shirts and black pants stood in front of me. I was worried sick, wanted to throw up also. But they told me I was to meet the Minister of Education and I felt alright. I wasn't even dressed properly you know, but I said 'ah, what the hell' and got in. It's not like I didn't bloody anticipate this no. I am no birdbrain.

I fasten my seatbelt. My God, the speed! The car makes the whistling sound of a pressure cooker and I repeat 'St. Andrew, pray for us' throughout the journey. Every hair on my body is vertical now. Yes, when I say every hair I mean every bloody hair. Even the ones there, yes. As we finally reach the Ministry of Education, once again, I draw *By the sign of the cross* across my face. Bloody hell, I was one minute away from meeting God at his gate for the final judgement you know, I'm not ready to go there just yet. Narrow escape. Ammo!

This time the cubicle is red and a dozen times nicer than the Ministry Secretary's but you see I see no prestige here. Strange, no? Anyhow there are no annoyed faces staring from the bloody walls in here so I feel less overwhelmed. Honestly, I tell you, less intimidated.

The Minister says hello and asks me a few useless questions in broken English. I answer him in the best version of English I know. I even use difficult synonyms in place of easy words, like anticipate for expect. Not bad, hna? Though a previous thug by profession, the Minister actually looks quite clean. My God, the shine in his shoes! Like mirrors only!

'So National School of Sri Lanka – so excellent!' As he commends my idea which is now referred to as a bloody Concept, I feel my face skin gleam with the scintillation of my bloody fantastic mind. Not bad for a fellow who was collecting coconuts, hna? All glory to St. Andrew. I give him a humble smile and look at his light yellow coloured national costume. The bugger probably drinks something cheap like Athi Vishesha. Guess what? I have a smirk on my face now. Strange, no, how life works? Like bloody Kelani river only. Sometimes it gives you a flood, sometimes not a single drop. Hmm.

'So Mr. Harold, so Prime Minister coming to my area function. So I have to say speech. So write a speech ok?' the Minister asks, making his eyes bigger and bigger every time he says *so*.

I nod. Not because I'm bloody scared of him, but because I'm fascinated by how far this is going. For St. Andrew's sake I have started enjoying this, don't you see? Alright folks, now this gets interesting.

On my way back, guess what the Private Secretary of the Minister tells me. The Minister cannot read English.

'Seriously?' I exclaim and they all shush me down.

'Er – so I write it in English and you people write the English words in Sinhala letters for him?' I ask with a bloody surprised face. Madness, no?

'No no no,' the Private Secretary says, 'to be honest, even that can't be done'. Then he adjusts his tie and bends towards me, 'because - '

'Because?'

'He can't read Sinhala either'

‘My God! What in heaven’s names are you talking about?’

Apparently, they have a bloody way of doing these things. This is how it will go. Don’t laugh now, alright? I have to write a good speech, but use words that are the easiest to pronounce. What a shame, yes. The Minister is to wear small wireless earphones and the Private Secretary is to read the bloody speech to him from somewhere else. The Minister is to repeat that. Word to word. Not bad, hna?

‘Praise the Lord he has long hair to cover the ears!’ I say. But when there is no response, I understand why the bugger’s hair is long. Bloody loon.

Look here, I don’t understand why the world still calls us a third world country. Look at our first-class strategies! Well, we may have an economy that goes down the drain day by day, but that is completely a different story, no? Hmm.

So, I write the bloody speech. I need four glasses of Chivas Regal for this purpose, but don’t tell me you judge me now. I see no other way I can do this bloody business.

It is the day of the event. I sit in my living room and switch on the television. The event is a live broadcast and it is about to start. I hear a knock on the bloody door and it is Mrs. Dissanayake with a prawn curry dish in her hand. Her famous signature dish. Whenever there’s a dinner or a lunch at their place, the woman comes with her bloody iPad she doesn’t know how to operate, in order to take pictures. My God, when that happens, it becomes one hell of a holy mess, that house. She is forever trying to shrink everyone and also her precious prawn curry into the same bloody picture. Madness! Madness! Then she wants to take sub-pictures – only the family, only the guests. I haven’t told this to anybody else but I tell you, the woman once took a picture of only the graduates and I was the only one left out so I had to take the picture. My God, it was so embarrassing. She thinks I didn’t bloody mind because I always wear a bona fide smile, but I wanted to dig a bloody hole and die. And now the Minister is going to read my speech, who is the graduate now, hna? Hna, vicious witch?

I say ‘thank you’ with a smile and take the bloody dish to my hand but it doesn’t seem like the woman wants to go. She starts talking about her son in the US who has recently found a special friend, a Sri Lankan girl with nice features. And a degree of course.

‘Aiyo Nihal is constantly making calls to him telling stories about the things he did to impress me those days, aiyo lajjai aney’ she blushes, ‘it is all nice and sweet, but you see Harold, long distance calls, no?’

I smile, again. The bloody prawn curry dish is very hot. I look at the television and realize that the Minister will start his speech in a few minutes. So, I shut the door in the woman’s face against her will, pour the prawn curry over my plate of rice and start eating, staring at the television.

The speech before the Minister’s is bloody impressive. They’re not all buffoons I tell you. Then they invite the Minister of Education to the podium and I feel like I have a little stomach ache – it must be the bloody prawn curry. Or it could solely be the speech. To be honest, now I have had enough of this National School of Sri Lanka business. I swear on St. Andrew, it has been too much. So, I pour myself a bloody drink.

The Minister starts the speech. He gets the greeting and the introduction right. Ah! I am so thankful for his Sinharaja beard which makes his words anyway incomprehensible. The fellow says *so* when he needs more time to listen to the Private Secretary. Not bad, hna? Well, better than the others I have encountered so far for St. Andrew’s sake.

My God, he says ‘I am mad’ where he is supposed to say ‘I am glad’ and my stomach starts growling. But thankfully, nobody notices. I tell you, probably nobody is listening. I see the stupefied faces of the Ministry Secretary, many other Secretaries and Provincial Directors, praying to very many Gods in their heads simultaneously. I see one chanting openly with his lips. Bloody height of madness. The Gods must be pulling this off as teamwork, no?

The fellow confuses a few *effects* and *affects*, *assures* and *ensures*, but who doesn’t? So, it is fine. Now he comes to the final paragraph and I take a huge sip of what’s in my glass. Two sentences done. My God am I not nervous! One more. I wasn’t concentrating this much on the day my nephew read his first letters even, you know? One more sentence managed. Phew. Well, he said National Pool of Sri Lanka but it’s not like something like that doesn’t exist no. Cut the bugger some slack, will you, he’s trying his best. Now I am literally standing six inches away from the bloody screen. I take the crystal glass of scotch to my hand.

The bugger is in the middle of a sentence and he pauses.

‘So’ he says. He wipes his bloody mouth and looks up.

‘So, er-’

The camera now focuses on the Prime Minister’s attentive face.

‘Er- um- so’

The bugger is stuck. He cannot understand what the Private Secretary says. Drops of sweat are rolling down my back right now. I take the printed speech to my hand and have a look - it’s the last bit of the last sentence. *For the sake of our Constitution*, it should say. I got that sentence from a newspaper article. What’s so difficult about that? Bloody birdbrain!

‘For-the-sake-of-our-Cons-ti-tu-tion. Come on! For St. Andrew’s sake!’ I shout. Then I slurp the last bit of Chivas Regal in the glass.

The Minister then sends his index finger to his right ear and makes his eyes small. He takes a sip of water from a crystal glass and opens his bloody mouth.

‘For the sake of our constipation. Thank you.’

A few days later, the day before my fiftieth birthday, as I am about to go collect fallen coconuts on the estate, the bloody landline starts ringing. I grunt and walk to the telephone. It is the Prime Minister’s Office calling and my legs feel numb when I hear that the Prime Minister wishes to meet me and that there would be a vehicle outside my home in an hour.

After a ritual-like entering into the building and dramatic customary greetings, the Prime Minister starts talking. My God, the confidence in his voice! ‘Mr. Harold, I called you here because I have decided that you should become my speechwriter.’

Even before I open my dry mouth to respond to the statement which is going to jolly well change my life, a letter of appointment is handed to me. I carefully inspect the gold foiled emblem of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka at the top of the letter, my God the shine!

‘You may start working from tomorrow’