

**High School Short Story
Honorable Mention**

**The Meaning of a Revolution
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For years, I have wandered around places in Sri Lanka on my calloused paws: urban and rural, superficial and bucolic, bland and colorful. Every day, I see people: Some that are new, and some the same. The other day, I went to a murky gem pit where I saw machines churning away dirt as the supervisors sat in chairs. The supervisors looked rotten and brash with gums bright red with betel, knives tucked into their sarongs and cutting away at their backs. They sat and satirized the humble workers across the way: the people who walked miles with baskets dipped in the river waters to find gems. I happened to follow one of the river gem workers home, hiding yards behind, shrouded by the dust left behind in his path. I walked behind him noticing his calloused feet shredding bare across slicing rocks, face blank yet glum. He fiddled and unshackled the door to his humble home: a place that was not much more than a blue tin box. I did not follow him in but scampered around back to see one boy kicking around a worn plastic bag with the same desolate expression as the man. Homes in the area usually had a contented aura though people's belongings were meager. It was very unusual to have people in such a contemplative and unhappy state. Behind the house, the usually magnificent river seemed murky.

I slept in a nearby pipe that night, holed up comfortably but tangled in confusions. I did not feel nor pay attention to the time that night, enveloped in the fantasies of the gem miner's family. I felt their agony of being stripped of all opportunity at work, leaving dripping gashes of financial deprivation in the process. But I could not understand why others were so different. Life in the village, Ratnapura, was tough, but people were happy. People lived a volatile life but thought only of the present. I woke up late in the morning, but I enjoyed only a scarce bit of rest. I was lost in the forest of the family's many fates, and I struggled to put my wandering mind to rest.

As soon as I woke up, I darted back over toward the house, scanning the area until I saw the metallic box-like home with chipping blue paint. I ran along the side of the house to see the gloomy boy sitting in the backyard. I noticed that he was covered in dirt and his eyes were red and swollen from the dust bowl of their backyard. The gem worker's wife stood staring out the kitchen window blankly, with rotting teeth and hopeless eyes. I looked around for a few more minutes only to find a dirty household and decided to run back to the gem river. There, I found gem workers wading in the water with their baskets, coming to shore to look at their findings, and then repeating the process. But in the river, I could not find the man that I followed home the day before. I scanned the riverbanks, looking for his unforgettable glum expression. Then, I saw a man staring at the fence, with eyes that spewed hatred. It was the same man, and he was staring at the commercial mining supervisor. I heard him yelling in rude Sinhalese, berating, complaining, and scolding the man for reasons that seemed to exceed not giving him a job. The fire in his eyes told me that he has not always been gloomy; it seemed that he was once a happy man. Life went on.

I listened to him converse sourly over bland mountains of barley with his friends, at first complaining about the commercialization in the area but moving on to his personal issues. He spattered out that his life has been ruined, saddened and dampened, he murmured about his lonely son and daydreaming wife through clenched teeth. And then he talked about his daughter. I realized that I had never seen his daughter, that this forthcoming information would allow me to understand his glumness. I thought that she may be dead, abducted, kidnapped, missing, but I was not sure what it truly was. He muttered about a master, beatings and low pay, confusing me as to why a gem company owner would do such things until I realized that he was talking about his daughter. As he further explained the story I realized that the daughter was a servant working for dirt cheap in the city to cook food and care for children, and what's more I found that the girl was no more than the age of 13. Servants in Sri Lanka are no oddity, almost every estate and city household have multiple, but seldom as young as the age of 12.

I loitered around the pipes that night. I walked in the shadows behind the commuting gem workers and I watched for others with a gloomy drag to their step, and I found a handful. I wandered back to the same sleeping pipe in the same contemplative state. I curled up into a ball and thought yet again; however, this time I thought about the unfairness in the gemming industry. I imagined parents selling their children to work for months on end in vicious unknown households. I imagined siblings' tears dropping like pebbles as they lose their companions with the underlying knowledge that they are next to work. I stayed up late yet again: not because I was not tired but because my mind was churning with visions. I woke up early that morning to look for more of the sad gem workers, scouring the streets for sorrow.

The first house I looked through was one that I remembered as lively and one of the hearts of the community. Inside the house there were seven children that seemed pleased, but only because they had each other. They were skinny, even emaciated, with bulging eyes and bloated stomachs. Sitting on the mud-ridden steps was the gem worker's wife, face dampened by dirt, not the bubbly village leader that she once was. I knew that the father of the household was a manual gem worker, not because he could not get another job, but because river gemming is an emblem of his family's tradition and pride. The house next door was the same story, but without children. As I looked through the tin homes that were once vibrant just a few years ago, I saw the same drab dejectedness that is the product of the lack of money. This pattern was only broken when I saw the small but robust cement houses of the families of commercial gem workers. They were visible monuments of success amongst the winners in the industrial shift.

There was no shot at a revolution, for the only flame I saw was the drunken anger of one gem miner. The people felt rejected, not provoked. The people did nothing but surrender and dwell in defeat. That was when I heard the first scream. Not one of fear or horror, but a battle cry. The primitive howl that characterizes war or rebellion. I darted toward the noise, and I ended up at the fence where the man was yelling at the commercial gem miners the day before. The same man was holding a blackened piece of scrap metal molded into a machete-type figure, he was charging at the commercial supervisor. The supervisor pulled out a switchblade, yelling to

stop and cursing at the rebel. Many cowered in fear and some started to grab weapons and join the fight. They were practicing the primitive release of anger, satisfying the all familiar urge to scream in anger or agony, to cry desolate tears, and to fight. The commercial workers were scrambling, searching for the rebels and trying to intimidate them with high-quality knives, with little success. The rebels kept charging as the others retreated, bewildered at the random conflict. Like wolves, rebels snarled and hurled slashes, rushing forward on the roads without minding the horror of onlookers. I sprinted toward the action for no one would notice me scuttling down the street. Tongue sticking out and flying back as I concentrated on the fighting, I started to think of the people out of the action. The village was densely populated for its size, and many of the vulnerable were near the bloodshed.

All of the children and most of the others who were not in the battle howled and sobbed in horror. Some prayed, voices dry, raspy from screaming in hopelessness. But a few did not. Their eyes were wide in horror but were in no way discouraging the fight. When a rebel slaughtered a defenseless commercial miner, they did not cheer but sighed in relief. These were the people who supported the clandestine movement, not vocally, but in the heart. They were the people who were relieved by rebellion, relieved that others have fought the battle that they may have fought. Rebels died, pushing glum families further into depression, washing out the last ember of hope. White hot pain. It radiated from the sun-scorched ground beneath me, from the hard-fought blood, from the gashes and battle scars, from the heart of the rebellion.

Then I saw the toddler crouching in the ditch.

Eyes wide in fear, the child sat and wept in the ditch. It was a boy, and he had an inflated paper bag at his foot, most likely his only toy. His parents were nowhere to be seen and the battle was moving toward him. With the screams encroaching in my ears, I darted with all of my might toward the child, clutching his shirt in my jaw as he began to howl louder. As a creature seen to lack intelligence, I had an open road. Once we were safe behind a building, I set the child down. The dust from the road was fogging his wounds, probably infecting them as well. He tried to get up and wander about, so I had to continually knock him over. *Stand, ram, stand, ram.* Once I was sure that he learned his lesson, I peered around the corner toward the battle. Many laid on the ground with gashes across their chests with their heads tilted lifelessly to the side, eyes open. The dead.

As the dust settled, I scanned across the bodies strewn across the road. In the distance, I saw the other fighters, chests heaving, strolling and blinking in shock. They were looked at disapprovingly by their wives and children, the outsiders with a view controlled by logic rather than the capricious combatants that acted only by emotion. But the real sight was those close to the fallen. Other men, women, and children kneeled next to their fallen loved ones, each solemnly closing eyelids over lifeless eyes. Some were in tears, but most were in shock for in the morning it had been a routine gloomy day. The saddest sights of all were the children, not only had they seen their parents dead on the street, but they had seen how they died. They died foolishly, in an outburst of anger with intentions hardly substantiated. But life was bound to go on.

In times of great hardship comes revolution and in the dusty roads that day a battle was born. The anger was ripe and organic, like a scream from the bottom of one's lungs. Under the scorching sun they came together and revolted, and as the sun went down the rebellion retracted regretfully. They plodded back to their homes, relieved to let out the swelling anger but sunken at the fact that their revolt achieved nothing.

The day after, the temple was packed to the brim. People of the Buddhist faith came to pray and meditate for forgiveness and tranquility. Some of the men I recognized as being in the center of the fight and it seemed like they came to pray with blood still caked on their hands. The priests looked with sober sadness over the people, but without shame or condemnation because they knew that the bloodshed taught each and every man his lesson. Hands clasped and raised to the sky, the scene showed the direness and gravity of the situation. More than anything, it foreshadowed the imminent consequences.

I walked back through the village to the home where I first saw the man who began the rebellion. The homeless and the vendors were not giving off the usually jovial aura.

After that day, the man's daughter stayed a servant. I saw her one day, coming off of the bus to reunite with her family for a few short days. She was small, not more than 4 foot 10, but she worked like any other laborer. Her eyes had dark rings of exhaustion, within which were sad eyes that were ready to quit everything. The village stayed the same for years to come: children leaving at 13, fathers going to work and coming home without success, and frankly sad families sitting and chewing on a life so unbearably bland and stale that they leave the home to work in an affluent household. The girl's brother went on to work on a nearby farm, but happily, driving around tractors and slaughtering wild boar for restaurants with a contentedness with life unrivaled in the village. The revolt proved to me that the forgotten people revolt, for better or for worse, without necessarily minding the success it will bring. I grew old, never again seeing a revolt like the one on that dusty day. On every rebel's face that fateful day, I saw the primitive anger, unrest that comes from the lack of success, the lack of anything sweet and pleasant. Though the face is not very conscious, it seems controlled by blind inspiration, it seems forgotten, digging erratically for one moment of power. I walked the streets and dusty roads as a run-of-the-mill Sri Lankan street dog, to villages so far and different from one of the forgotten gem workers, with the strong knowledge and vivid memories of ripe rebellion. Life went on.

I never saw a place quite like the gem town in my travels, in part because there were no such transitioning industries and in part because the nation was progressing. There were two worlds in the gem town: the commercial gem miners and the traditional ones. In my view, both lacked the eagerness in life that made it colorful and worth living, the lack may even have sparked the rebellion. Even the homeless beggars were happy because they had a feeling of contentedness that even city folk lacked. I watched as plantation workers plucked tea on green-coated mountains with straw baskets and cobras at their bare toes. In cities, I saw rows of tin shops with crumbling foundations with the chatter of people that were unmistakably part of a tightly connected community. All in all, I found that the secret to the mystery of happiness was to rely

on a strong community, to be content with belongings, and to have something meaningful to do.