

A NEW LIFE FOR ROO

THE LITTLE RED TUK TUK

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"Send Roo to the recycling yard?" gasped Sumee. "Never! If old Uncle Aju hears you say that, he'll have a fit!"

Sumee's mother looked at him sternly. "Well, *something* has to be done about that pile of nuts and bolts. It's rusting away by the wall. It's falling apart! And look at all the weeds and creepers making their way through it!"

Sumee didn't wait to hear the rest. He bolted through the open door and didn't stop until he reached old Uncle Aju's home a few doors away.

"Uncle Aju?...Uncle Aju!" he called as he sped in. "We must do something to stop her!"

"Calm down," said the old man seated by the window. "Calm down and tell me what has happened now."

So Sumee took his favourite spot at Uncle Aju's feet and poured out the entire story.

"Now, now. I won't let your mother just throw Roo away," Uncle Aju assured the distraught boy.

"Uncle Aju," said Sumee, "can you please tell me a story of you and Roo?"

"You never tire of that," laughed the old man. "Which one do you want to listen to today? How we became an ambulance? Or, the day we participated in the Tuk Tuk Race? Or how Roo played Tuk Tuk Polo?"

"Polo? How do you play Polo? Don't we eat that?"

"No!" laughed Uncle Aju. "This is a game, with sticks and a ball and a net!"

Sumee spent the next one hour in rapt silence seated at the old storyteller's feet. He had only to close his eyes and he could just picture the Tuk Tuks - swerving this way and that as they pursued the ball. The shouts of the Polo players as they leaned precariously out of the vehicles,

filled his ears. His mother always accused him of living in the clouds, while his father joked that if he heard *Once upon a time...* he would freeze while running.

The spell came to an abrupt end with the entrance of Sumee's mother. "Here you are! I told you to do your homework this evening, not to sit day dreaming in this dark damp house."

She eyed Uncle Aju with some dislike. "Uncle Aju," she went on, with only a hint of politeness in her voice, "I know you are fond of the boy, but I must insist that you don't humour him so much, especially on school days. He has a lot of work to do... And I'm sure we all want him to be something better than a tri-shaw driver in the future, don't we?"

With that parting remark, Sumee's mother pulled the boy to his feet and propelled him out of the house.

"That crazy old man is a menace!" she said as she dragged him across the back yard. "He's uneducated and a bad influence. You are not to speak to him again, do you hear? And, I figured out that trick you pulled to cut school, pretending to be sick I don't want your whole future going down the drain because of his ideas!

Despite his mother's outburst, Sumee just could not put the rusty red tri-shaw out of his mind. Every day, as he walked to school and back, he saw the old vehicle, parked against the back wall of their compound. Every day Roo seemed to look at him in mute appeal through sad eyes.

One afternoon Sumee saw Uncle Aju seated on a rock by the tri-shaw's side. Making sure his mother was nowhere to be seen, Sumee too joined his friend.

"Uncle Aju," he whispered, not wanting to intrude, "Why doesn't Roo speak anymore? In your stories he always has such a lot to say."

"Well," replied the old man, surreptitiously wiping away a tear from his face, "after the accident he was so badly damaged the mechanic said my only option was to sell the parts. But I just couldn't do that to him. Even now, every time I see a shop selling 'BODY PARTS' I think of Roo. So, I did the next best thing. I drained all his petrol and kept him here. Without the fuel he isn't alive, you know... but as long as I can see him close by he's not dead either..."

Sumee hugged Uncle Aju fiercely.

"I WON'T let Amma have him towed away - I WON'T! Don't worry, Uncle, we'll think of something."

Later that evening Sumee stood among his friends from the neighbourhood. After sharing with them some of his favourite stories of Roo the Little Red Tuk Tuk, he told them of his mother's plan to send the tri-shaw to the scrap yard. Predictably, all the children were shocked and upset. Amidst exclamations of "Aiyo!" and "Not fair!" he outlined the plan.

"So, what we need to do is this - find a new place for Roo. Not all of us attend the same school, and some of you go out of the town for classes. If we all keep our eyes and ears open, I'm sure we'll find some use for him."

The days stretched on and Sumee had almost given up hope when another boy in their Rescue Squad group appeared at his door.

"Not now, Ravi, Sumee has to finish his homework!" said his mother as soon as she saw who was knocking.

"But, Auntie, Sumee wanted to borrow my science book. You know, I started a new tuition class and it all makes sense now, so I thought Sumee would like to read the book." replied the quick thinking young fellow.

Having extracted his friend from the house, Ravi dragged him around the corner before blurting out, "I found it!"

"What? Your science book?" asked Sumee, who was a bit perplexed.

"No, you idiot! A place for Roo!" Ravi was by now hopping from one foot to the other in excitement.

"Wait! Let's go to Uncle Aju's house and tell him too."

The two boys ran by the wall, crept past Sumee's back door, and raced round the corner to land panting at the old man's doorstep.

"Uncle Aju! Ravi has some good news for us!" said Sumee as he led the way into the small hall.

As soon as the boys were seated on the floor, Ravi launched into his tale. "So, my Aiya Nimal, Auntie Kumari's son, has just started a repair shop, right? He fixes phones, bikes, anything really. And he had this new idea, right, to get more customers, to have the item delivered to their

house once it is ready. The shop has become very popular now, so whenever there's too much work I also do some deliveries. Anyway, today after school, Nimal Aiya asked me to drop off a phone to a house outside town. And on the way, can you guess what I saw? There was this playground, and right in the middle was an old truck! They had painted it and all but it was just a broken down old truck. And there were kids playing all over it!"

At this point, having run out of breath, he paused, and looked excitedly at his audience.

Their blank looks made him jump to his feet.

"Don't you see? We can do the same thing with Roo! We can have him moved to our playground, and set him up in a nice way so that we can play in him!"

As the two boys whooped and yelled, Uncle Aju glanced out of his window at the playground in the distance. "Well done, boys! I'll speak to Ruwan and ask him to lend his tractor and some workmen. I think we can do this!"

When Sumee returned from school the next afternoon, he was pleased to see that Roo was no longer in his usual place. Rather than draw his mother's attention to it, he obediently sat down to lunch. What was unexpected was his mother's unusual good mood.

"Eat up your vegetables, son. Now that tri-shaw has gone I can grow a proper vegetable garden."

Sumee paused with his hand halfway to his mouth.

"It was such an eye-sore, and dangerous too! All that rusty metal. Aju should have had it removed years ago. It's a miracle no one needed a tetanus shot!"

Sumee swallowed his last mouthful, and took the plate to the kitchen sink.

"Ruwan didn't want to do it, but I talked him into it. I hope he gets rid of that scrap metal safely before -"

The plate crashed into the sink.

"What?" Sumee almost shouted.

"Haven't you been listening? Head in the clouds, as usual. I got Ruwan to remove that pile of junk!"

These words rang in Sumee's ears, and seemed to echo in his brain... '*got Ruwan to remove...*'

Ignoring the broken plate, ignoring his mother's exclamations, he turned and ran. He ran as if someone's life depended on it. And it did - he knew deep within himself that if Roo was disposed of old Uncle Aju would have nothing left to live for.

As he approached Ruwan's workshop he could see the blue, silver and gold sparks of the welding machine at work. Ignoring the cries of the workmen Sumee ran right in. What happened next, he remembered later, only in bits of colour and sound. Overpowering it all was the searing pain.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself surrounded by green curtains. Guided by the sound of sobbing he glanced to his left. His mother sat in a chair with her head in her hands.

"Amma?"

"Sume! You're awake! Oh, my darling, I'm so sorry! It was all my fault! I didn't realize Roo meant so much to you. I was so caught up in trying to give you a better future; I didn't see what was important to you here and now."

"So, what happened to Roo? Did they...?"

"No, they hadn't started working on him. I spoke to Aju and Ruwan. They will fix him up just as you wanted, and as soon as you are up to it, we will all escort him to his new home."

Sume was so excited he tried to get out of bed immediately, but his mother convinced him to stay in bed as the doctor had requested. His

right foot had been badly cut when he fell over the equipment in the garage, and there were burns on his arms.

So it was over a week later that the proposed move took place. The procession to the playground included not only the Tuk Tuk in the wagon of the tractor and Uncle Aju and Sumee seated beside it, but a whole crowd of enthusiastic neighbours and passers-by who kicked up the dust as they followed. A lot of hefting and heaving later, the little Tuk Tuk presided over his new home.

In next to no time, children from all around gathered to see their new playmate. When word spread that the Tuk Tuk's former driver was a fantastic storyteller, impromptu gatherings started taking place at the foot of the old vehicle, with Uncle Aju working his magic surrounded by a sea of excited faces. As time passed, people in the neighbourhood made an extra effort to spruce up the playground a little more: the rides took on new colour and the grass and flowers were tended to. Even the local politician took an interest one election season and erected a fancy fountain in one corner. No matter, however, what additions were made, it was always Roo in his special place that caught a visitor's eye.

Ultimately, even Sumee's mother had to agree that the little Red Tuk Tuk had made things better for everyone.

