



Coconut Dreams



stories

Derek Mascarenhas

CARRIERS

a story from

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by

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Carriers

Burlington, Ontario, Canada:

“Look at that one, he’s got a big butt,” said my sister.

“Ants don’t have butts, Ally. It’s called an abdomen.”

“How can they not have butts?”

“I don’t know.” I knew an explanation would bring another endless string of questions.

We’d been squatting on the sidewalk for five minutes, our eyes fixed on the two lines of ants trailing to and from someone’s dropped Popsicle. The Popsicle had melted, and the stick lay in a pool of pink sugar that the ants sucked up and carried away. Because of the weight, the line of ants that took away the sweet liquid moved more slowly than the line that arrived.

I liked ants. They always seemed to be working on something. A display at the Science Centre had an anthill with small plastic windows to provide glimpses into their lives. There was so much activity going on in the passageways and chambers, the ants constantly at work and in motion.

“Look, Aiden, those two are fighting!” Ally said, pointing. Two ants had broken off from the rest to wrestle each other. We watched them fight until one ant was decapitated and dragged away. “Why did he do that?” she asked.

I stood. “C’mon, we should get going.”

I took two pieces of cinnamon gum from my fanny pack and gave one to Ally, getting ready for Chrissy’s house—she was a girl in my class I didn’t like. Then I counted the money we’d collected so far. “Think we can get twenty-five more dollars? I need twelve to get my new baseball glove before the tournament.”

“Twenty-five dollars!” Ally said, chewing her gum. “That’ll be tough the second time around.”

She took out the notebook and opened it to the last lined page. In the neatly written column for April were all the house numbers that regularly paid but we hadn’t collected from yet. The *Post* was our town’s community newspaper, and most of the sixty houses we delivered to gave us a small tip every month—our spending money. Dad took the pennies-per-paper the *Post* paid us as a salary and put it into savings bonds each year. “For your university,” he said. University seemed too far away to be real, but Dad always said it with a smile. He once showed us Mom’s and his very first bank statement from when they came to Canada. Ally and I took the folded pages from their original envelope and read the names, Felix A. Pinto and Clara M. Pinto, and the balance of just thirty dollars. Dad told us, “And we had to borrow that thirty dollars, too. At that time you were only allowed to bring ten dollars out of India, and that went in the first days.”

Ally and I walked along the sidewalk, following our regular route to houses with big garages and front lawns. We only went to the houses that paid when we collected for the month, and learned that Sunday, around five, was the best time to catch

people at home. We always went together, because people tipped better when there were two of us.

None of the other kids in my class had jobs, but my best friend Johnny had an older brother who did papers, too. He sometimes just threw his whole stack in the dumpster behind the convenience store. But we always delivered our papers on time. A truck came to our house three times a week to drop off big bundles of newspapers and flyers. We assembled them as fast as we could and became expert shoppers in the process—we flipped through the glossy inserts from every store and spotted the sales.

The other day my sister had proudly told my father, “Basmati rice for three forty-nine.”

“Oh, that’s a very good price,” he answered. He usually helped us assemble the papers after work but had to take a nap right after.

“Ice cream’s on sale for a dollar forty-nine, too,” I added, trying my luck.

We had a system for delivering papers. We’d memorize the house numbers, load up the metal wire buggy, and each take a side of the street. We’d then meet at the end with ink-stained hands in front of Chrissy’s house to spit our gum onto the sidewalk. When we got home, Mom made us wash our hands the moment we stepped inside so we didn’t get fingerprints all over the white walls. Black soapy bubbles, and we were done.

I blew a bubble with my gum and checked the count with Ally—after the first five houses, we’d collected only six dollars. We approached number 656 hoping the Sheppards were home. Mr. and Mrs. Sheppard were always nice to us, and Mr. Sheppard was so interesting. He was the only man I knew who had a long grey ponytail, and it seemed like every time we saw him he’d just come back from playing hockey, or ice fishing, or camping or hiking up north with Mrs. Sheppard.

We walked past the Volkswagen in the driveway, onto the porch, and knocked on the door. We heard movement inside the house, and through the pane of blurred glass next to the door we saw a figure coming down the stairs.

Mr. Sheppard opened the door, wearing what he always wore: blue jeans and a black T-shirt, his ponytail hanging down the back, and a thick wooden pipe in his mouth.

Ally said, "Hi, we're collecting for the *Post*."

"Of course, come on in and I'll see what I can scrounge up."

Fruity-smelling smoke trailed behind Mr. Sheppard as we followed him inside. Mom had told us not to go into people's homes, but we sometimes did, anyway.

"You kids aren't thirsty, are you?" he called from the kitchen.

"No thank you. We're fine," I said back, unsure if he heard me.

My eyes darted around the hallway and living room, over the snowshoes in the corner, the porcelain dog next to the reclining chair, the long piece of driftwood and mason jar filled with seashells and smooth stones on top of the coffee table, before settling on a big framed painting hanging above the couch. The painting was of a lake at sunset with evergreens all around, and the sky and water were pink. Mr. Sheppard had told us his grandfather had painted it. It made me want a picture like that in our house, but I only had one grandparent left, and he was in India.

Mr. Sheppard returned a few moments later, grinning around his pipe. "Well, I only got a ten, but here you go," he said, and handed Ally the bill.

She gave the ten to me, and I folded it into the fanny pack. Mr. Sheppard must have still been in a good mood. Just last week his picture had been in the paper beside an article about him trying to stop the city from building new houses by the creek. We had given him all the extra copies we had of that day's paper. He said he was going to frame the article.

“Now, that money is for you two, do you understand?” he said. “I don’t want any of that going to the *Post*.”

We promised him we would keep the money, and said thank you before we headed out the door.

After Mr. Sheppard’s, I thought for sure we’d get enough to buy my baseball glove. A lot of other families weren’t home, though, and by the time we reached the last house—Chrissy’s—we were still four dollars short. The sun was not so high anymore. I thought of my old baseball glove, which the ball sometimes went right through.

As we approached the house, I saw the blotches of gum on the sidewalk. Chrissy had been in my class since kindergarten. Every year we competed for the best grades. Whenever we got a test back, she would come over to my desk and compare marks. She kept quiet if I got a better score than her, but if she scored higher, she always said, “I beat you.” But that’s not why I didn’t like her. At the bake sale last year, I’d brought in Kulkuls. My family usually only made the sweet at Christmas, but it was my mom’s idea to make them the Saturday before the sale. Most kids brought in cookies, cakes, and frosted muffins topped with Smarties happy faces, and my teacher and the other parents loved how the Kulkuls weren’t so sugary and had more of a spicy-sweet taste.

When my teacher asked how they were made, I began to explain how we rolled small pieces of dough on a comb to make the shape of a shell.

Chrissy interrupted. “That’s disgusting!”

I tried to tell her it was a brand-new comb that we boiled first and just used to get the pattern, but it didn’t work. She told everyone my dessert was made with a comb and had hair inside. None of the kids would try one after that. Chrissy’s mom had brought in a giant gingerbread house that everyone loved. She gave each kid a gingerbread man, too. Mine was

missing an icing eye, and also went uneaten.

After that, we still delivered the paper to Chrissy's house, but stopped collecting from her. Every time I passed her house, I made sure no one was looking and spat out my gum on the sidewalk. After a while, the gum got flattened and dirty, and turned black. Ally had started joining me, too, when I told her the gum-spitting was non-violent resistance. When we were younger and Mom had told us about Gandhi, we imagined an Indian Hercules, strong and powerful. We were shocked when we finally saw a photo of him. This skinny bald man with thick glasses couldn't possibly be the man who had freed India from the British. "His power," our mother told us, "came from within."

Ally was about to spit her gum out on Chrissy's sidewalk, and I told her to wait. "Let's try this house."

"I thought she was mean to you?"

"I know, but they pay every time we go. And I need that glove."

As we were deciding in front of Chrissy's house, with its perfect grass and double garage, a BMW pulled into the driveway. Chrissy and her mom got out.

"Hi! How are you kids? Are you collecting?" Chrissy's mom looked like Barbie and carried a shiny shopping bag in each hand.

"Yes, for the *Post*," Ally managed to say.

I tried to cover the gum spots with my shoe.

"Well, come on inside and I'll check if I have any cash."

Chrissy wore a Girl Guides uniform with a sash full of badges. She said, "Hey," as she passed by and our eyes met. I tried to hide my gum under my tongue, but Ally was still chewing away.

I said, "Hey," but it didn't sound right.

We followed her up the steps and into her house. There was a dining room to the left of the foyer, a spiral staircase to the right, and a long hallway straight ahead with a hardwood

floor. We stood next to a glass table with a vase filled with dried flowers. My mom didn't like flowers that were fake or plants that weren't alive. She had potted versions of her favourites from back home: a rubber plant, a small palm tree, and pink bougainvilleas that she kept outside in the summer to flower. I thought they looked better than dried flowers, too.

Chrissy went up the stairs, and her mom put her shopping bags on the dining table. When she closed the glass doors on her way out of the dining room, I thought of the beaded curtains that separated our family room and hallway. Ally and I always tried to limbo underneath them, or part their way with the least movement and noise.

Chrissy's mom returned with her purse, but shouted out, "Dad?" before she opened it. "Dad? Did you eat the food I left out?"

An old man appeared at the end of the hallway and stared at us. He wore a grey wool sweater and had white hair and stubble on his face.

The phone rang, and Chrissy's mom said to us, "Oh, just a sec, kids." She put her purse on the ground and ran into another room.

Ally tugged my shirt and gave me a look like she was uncomfortable. I mouthed, *Wait*. It would look weird if we just left. But then the old man started shuffling slowly toward us.

I heard Chrissy's mom say hello three times, each time slower than the last, before she finally hung up.

"Must have been a wrong number," she said as she returned, and picked her purse off the floor. We watched her dig around in it for a while.

"Jeez, I've got no cash on me," she said. "Just hold on another minute and let me see if I have anything upstairs."

All the flavour in my gum had gone and it was getting harder

to chew. And the old man was getting closer to us. He held his backside as he walked. And he was crying silently, tears rolling down his wrinkled face.

Then I noticed the smell. I turned to Ally, who was looking more and more nervous.

Before either of us could speak, the front door opened and Chrissy's dad walked in. He wore a suit and had a leather bag slung over his shoulder like he'd just returned from work—strange on a Sunday.

"Jennifer!" he shouted, ignoring us. "Did Richard call?"

Chrissy's mom came halfway down the stairs. "Someone just called, but they didn't say anything."

"I've got to give him a call." He walked past us without a word or a nod but stopped before he reached the stairs.

"Jesus Christ, what is that smell?"

The old man said in a quiet voice, "I had an accident."

Chrissy's mom's face dropped. She took half a step downstairs, but then paused and simply told him to go wait in the washroom.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what happened," the old man whispered. His face was scrunched up like he was in pain, and it made me feel like I was the one who had the accident. He shuffled back down the hallway.

"This is what I come home to?" Chrissy's father stomped up the stairs. "Jen, we're putting him in a home."

"I'm not putting my father in a home." She followed him up and into a room we couldn't see, but we could still hear them.

"Then what do you want to do?" said Chrissy's dad. "And where were you all day, anyway?"

"Grocery shopping, pharmacy, florist, Chrissy's piano lessons, and Girl Guides. If you weren't at work all the time, you'd know this."

"My work pays for all those things, Jennifer. And right now I'm busy. I need to make a call."

"You're always busy. Did you spend today with that woman again?"

"She's my *client*, for fuck's sake!"

I heard what I thought was a stomp on the floor; it rumbled through the house.

Ally tugged at my shirt again, harder this time. She didn't speak, but her eyes were afraid. Our parents argued sometimes but never like that.

As we turned to go, Chrissy came down the stairs and stopped when she saw we were still there. She was stuck on that step for a few seconds, her parents arguing behind her.

"Mom." Chrissy ran back upstairs. "Mom! The paperboys are still downstairs."

Ally's face scrunched; she hated being called a *paperboy*.

"Just tell them to come back another time, Chrissy."

A door slammed upstairs, and the shouting started again.

A few seconds passed before Chrissy came back down. I was expecting her to tell us what we had just heard, about coming back another time.

"You'll wait forever for money, won't you?" she said.

I didn't say anything to her and neither did Ally, but when I shook my head, our eyes met, and she turned away and ran back upstairs.

Outside, with the door closed behind us, we breathed deeply. It had felt like Chrissy's house was running out of air.

Down on the sidewalk were the gum spots. As we walked over them, I swallowed the dry, hardened gum in my mouth—it caught in my throat before going down.

Ally was looking at me. She spoke softly: "I can lend you the money for the glove from my share."

I thanked her, but she just nodded, spat her gum out on the sidewalk, and turned to go. I glanced at the house and followed her with a chuckle, walking home slowly with the weight of all that we carried.