

Missiya, the Wild One

by Vijita Fernando

(Adapted story. Intermediate level)

Childhood is a time of innocence, when life is simple and uncomplicated. Children, watching the comings and goings of adults, often see things that they don't understand until years later, when they are adults themselves and know the ways of the world.

And the ways of the world are sometimes rather sad...

There is still talk about her in the village, all these years later. She did not come back after she went away so suddenly that morning ... no one really cared to find out what happened to her. But they did not forget her. Even recently an old man in the village said her name, Missiya, with sadness in his voice.

And the village never again knew anyone quite like her. They remembered her not so much for her good looks as for her boldness. She was good-looking, though. But in those days there was no way a good-looking girl could escape from village life and make an exciting future for herself. What could Missiya do, except sell her good looks while she was young? Selling them for so little - almost nothing.

Every time I go back home to the village I see Missiya in my mind. She had brown skin which shone with

good health, and a beautiful, strong body. She moved beautifully too. She used to carry a full pot of water on her hip and use her other hand to pick a fruit or a branch off a tree for firewood. She was full of fun. She ran when there was no need to run, smiled all the time and laughed often.

The women envied her, and felt jealous of the way men watched her lovely body.

Missiya never married. She never wanted to be like other village girls, who spent time getting to know boys, walking in the fields, talking of love, and making careful plans for the future. Missiya's house was usually full of men, and her parents did not mind her free and easy ways with the young men - and older ones - who crowded into that little house. No surprise, then, that before she was sixteen, people were already talking about her!

As a child I couldn't take my eyes off her. She had a pair of eyes which seemed enormous to me. Her smiling lips were full and red with betel juice. She used to laugh at the way I watched her, wide-eyed. Under her breath and still smiling, she used to whisper something which I knew was not meant for my child's ears. But there was no harm in her - it was her nature, her love of life!

But there were things I did not understand about her. Sometimes she was my friend. On some days when I saw her, she used to greet me cheerfully, take my hand in hers and take me into the woods to pick fruit, show me the animals and birds and a thousand secrets that lay hidden

there. But there were days when she pretended not to see me and looked away, as she hurried into the woods. That always made me sad and I felt a warm tear roll down my face. At those times I used to look away too, pretending to look at a wild flower or watch some insects on the ground.

I knew she did not want me around, and I wanted her to think that it did not matter. But it did. It did.

I did not understand the way my mother felt about her, either. As I grew a year or two older, she told me not to go into the woods with Missiya. Suddenly one hot afternoon mother called me from the garden and said, very firmly, 'You must not see Missiya again. You're not a child any longer - you must stop bothering her to play with you.'

I couldn't understand why. I didn't say anything. I stood by my mother and looked out of that sun-filled room. In the garden I saw the purple bougainvillea and the bright yellow hibiscus flowers. I wanted to be out there playing with Missiya. There was no one to play with except Missiya. And now my mother was telling me I must not play with her!

'Then who will make me a mud house when it rains?' I asked my mother, confused.

Mother knew me. She heard the anxiety in my voice and said quietly, without even lifting her eyes from the book she was reading, 'I will.'

Missiya did not miss me. She did not care at all that she had ended a handful of my dreams. She continued to laugh her way through the days, the months. She became more beautiful as the years passed and her lovely body became more rounded. There was a bolder look in her eyes and a wildness in her movements that drove the men crazy.

There were violent arguments in the village. Like the night when old Appuhamy's wife went to search for him and found him inside Missiya's house, drunk. The whole village gathered to watch and cheer, although it was well past midnight. All the women cursed Missiya, and the men watched her with a new interest. Missiya did not show the least concern. She spat an enormous mouthful of betel juice towards them and disappeared into the night.

They said that she was a witch. But by now I was old enough to know that she was no witch. She was human and soon enough I knew what she was. I began to understand what those trips into the woods meant. I knew the meaning of those violent arguments. I knew why some women hated her and cursed her. I began to understand why women like my mother wanted to protect their daughters from her influence and their sons from her clever tricks.

But Missiya herself was one of the world's lucky ones. She didn't care what anyone said. She didn't care what happened to anyone. She cared only about one person in the whole world and that was herself. Perhaps, in a way,

that did make her a witch. At least she was not quite human.

That thoughtless confidence of hers couldn't last, however. Almost ten years later, she came to live in a dark little hut that stood just beyond the end of our garden. By then she had begun to lose the freshness of her young beauty and her carefree ways. At twenty-five she was an adult woman, a good-looking woman, and an inviting one. She lived alone because her parents had died, but nothing else had changed with her. The village still hated her and loved her. The men still came to her by night. During the day she worked, making baskets. Day or night, she appeared not to care how the next meal came to her, what happened to her, or what she would do when she grew old.

When I met her for the first time after many years away, I was shy. She smiled at me as I walked past her little house.

'Well, well, how you've grown!' she said with her usual bold smile.

I said something in reply and hurried away. In the rapid look I gave her, I saw the heaviness of her body, and wondered if she was getting fat. There was something about her that seemed different. I looked back and saw her watching me. She had a look of catlike happiness on her face that day.

'Has she met some man and married him?' I wondered as I walked towards my parents' home. But soon enough I

knew she was not married. The village now felt sorry for her - she was a woman growing old before her time. The men did not come to her for their pleasures as much as before. The village was moving into the modern world - just two miles away there was now a cinema, and after the late-night showing there were women available there too. So Missiya was finding it hard to earn enough money even for food. The village talked and laughed unkindly about her: how poor she was, how little she had. Her clothes were unwashed, her habits dirty.

It seemed that the world's oldest profession did not pay very well.

The morning it happened started like any other. The sun shone and the raindrops danced on the wet grass. I walked down to the edge of the garden, reliving the pleasures of my childhood. These trips back to the village filled me with confused thoughts - a wish for past days, past magic, when the world and I were young...

The old tree where I had sat in the shade, and cried desperate tears over some young sadness or other, was still there. So was the dead tree trunk where my friends and I had sat on so many golden evenings and watched the sun go down. The voices from the past whispered in my ear, some long gone from my life...

The cool air was still so well-known and dear to me. And the morning sun gave a silver touch to the rice field spread out at my feet.

I stopped with a start when I saw the two policemen. They looked towards our house and then looked away. I took a step backwards and watched them. They spoke to each other and entered the large shed in which the hay was stored.

It was early morning. There was no one else around.

And quietly the village began to wake up. First, the old businessman, the Mudalali, clearing his throat and walking to the corner to get his morning newspaper. He was followed by the young man who worked in the tea shop. Then the women appeared, wanting to know what was happening. Suddenly there was a crowd, and excitement in the air. And then the policemen brought out the terrible bundle from inside the building. I shut my eyes and turned away.

It was such a tiny bundle, a helpless little thing, killed by its own mother and hidden in the hay. It had no father who would accept it as his child. So it had to die. A fatherless baby in that little village was a terrible thing, and women like its mother were cursed, perhaps even killed.

In that lovely little village, with its sunny green fields and blue hills, there was no room for that child.

And then they brought out the mother. She didn't hide her head guiltily, as they wanted her to. She still held her head high, and looked straight at all of us. I hid behind a tree and watched her - I still couldn't take my eyes off her. She looked at the silent crowd and then she noticed me. She

smiled at me, bold and direct, as always. I shut my eyes. She didn't care that I gave her no answering smile. She turned to the crowd with the same bold smile, and spat an enormous mouthful of betel juice towards them.

And then she went away with the policemen.

- THE END -

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