
RAINING COCONUTS

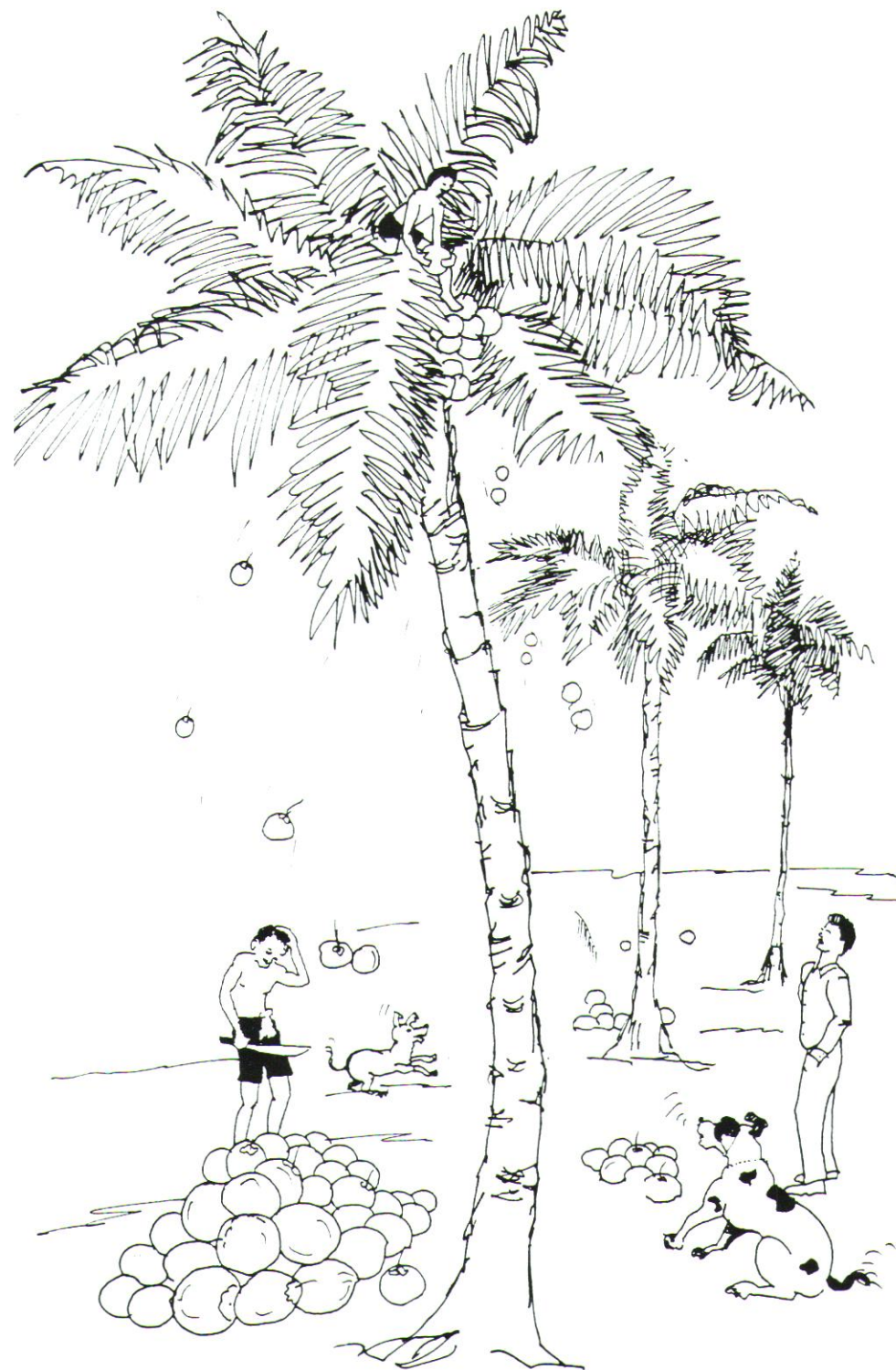
By Rosamund Man

A commotion on a sunny day, at 7:51 A.M. precisely, means only one thing: the coconut picker has arrived. He is tiny, stocky, bow-legged (hardly surprising), almost toothless when he smiles, which he does frequently, and extremely good at his job. He can't tell the time, is wobbly on the days of the week, yet miraculously always turns up at exactly nine minutes to

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eight, and on the 37th day after his last visit - excluding any rainy days.

How he works out his calendar is even more of a mystery than his agility at climbing the perilously tall, swaying trees. Bags are gathered, the dogs race off, followed by three cats, the cook, the gardener, and any visiting souls - to help catch, count, instruct, pack and carry.



Coconut picking is a social event.

The small, brawny picker steps out of his *sarong*, the other men hitch up theirs to make neat mini-skirts. A lethal-looking curved knife is tucked into the coconut picker's shorts and a small piece of thick rope is twisted into a figure of eight, then looped round his ankles. He stands at the bottom of the tree, plants each foot firmly round either side of the trunk, raises his arms, hugs the tree in a bear-like grip, and is off. And up. Quickly, in easy rhythm, he silently and swiftly climbs the trunk.

In less than half a minute he is at the top, almost disappearing among the cluster of thick, sharp-edged, fronds. He shouts his warning - the dogs bark frantically, running round the base of the tree in great excitement. The thudding of coconut falling to the ground comes fast and heavy. Occasionally one of the men, with macho bravado, catches a nut. When I first proffered gardening gloves I was given looks that could kill. It was gently but clearly pointed out that is was no place for me. I retreated, vainly calling the dogs and cats to follow. But then, as

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By the time I feel I am at a safe enough distance to turn around and watch, the picker has slithered down one tree and swooped up another. The first bag is almost full. Slash and drop. The cook is shouting - she wants some bigger ones. And a few smaller ones - still not ripe, but sloshy inside with the sweet, young water that is called *kurumb*, a heavenly drink for breakfast. She yells delighted approval as a cascade rains down. Another bag is filled: each one holds about 30 coconuts. Now it is time for the Big Tree.

This is a particularly fine specimen. Not just for its size, but the type of nut. It looks no different to my inexperienced eye but it is much prized and rarely seen nowadays. We are the envy of the neighbourhood. For these nuts, the picker levies a 50 per cent surcharge. He has to climb more than 20m into the air, scrabbling his way through the thick branches of jack and kitul palm trees that are interlocked around the coconut's slender trunk.

Now he is completely obliterated from view but shouts down precise directions as to where he is going to hurl these whoppers. Even the animals seem to know this is a special tree. They sit, quiet, at a respectable distance from the falling missiles. The picker is delighted: we have 19 specimens from the tree today, an all time record for one pick and extra cash for him. And that also means especially fine *pol sambols*, the delicious side dish made from grated coconut, pounded chilli, limes and onions, for all of us.

The small figure slithers down into view again; broad smiles, toothless from him, very thooty from the dogs. Nuts are retrieved, counted, bagged, carted off. *Sarongs* are donned again. Cups of hot, sweet tea and warm new bread are place on the table. Spoonfuls of fiery red chilli are pounded into the soft pile of freshly grated coconut flesh. We have another 109 coconuts outside. It took only one hour. But it was hard and hot work. The cold shower was welcome. The grin is contented. Breakfast good. (See also article on ***Plucking Coconut: a Dangerous and Exhausting Job*** by P.K. Thampan, COCOINFO INTERNATIONAL, Vol. 1 No.1 page 24-27). □

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