The Little Shore

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A common sight: fishing boats rest on the waters of Kudawella fishing harbour

A name that literally translates to ‘little shore’, Kudawella is a diminutive town nestled along the southern coastal belt in the Matara District. Little though, it may be, it had its own story to tell.

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Kudawella strikes a chord in-between towns. Its most telling feature is its pulse of life – the Kudawella fishing harbour. A sight that cannot be missed and at once stamps Kudawella in one’s mind is the throng of anchored fishing boats and a tangle of masts that speak of a seasoned harbour and fishing trade of these parts. Shoulder to shoulder hulls swarm the berths and fill the roadside view.

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This flourishing fishing port had not always been as it is today. Its beginnings are traced back to a direct descendant of the original settlers, Nawolis Muthumala. Born in 1928 when Kudawella comprised of a few simple huts along the beach, he began fishing at the age of 15. Instead of the sprawling harbour today complete with trawlers, wooden canoes sailed the waters and occupied the fishing grounds. These canoes of yore were accompanied with baskets or pehe attached to their sides,

where bait for the fishing lines were kept.

It was in the 60’s however that the use of nets became popular and changed the face of Kudawella. History of Kudawella credits Nawolis, during the 70s, by then a seasoned fisherman, for inventing an improved netting method to trap fish. Today Kudawella is a bustling town of 1,500 people with many of their livelihoods based around the fishing trade be it selling dry fish from road side stalls or setting out for weeks at a time on deep sea fishing to bring in a fresh haul of tuna.

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Setting directly out to the harbour is where it all unfolds at a dizzying pace. Fishing boats, catamarans and trawlers conjure a shock of colours further enlivened by a menagerie of people and activity. It is at six in the morning that rush hour dawns triggered by the arriving boats with fresh catch. Some of these boats arrive after almost a month out at sea. Tuna seemed to be the prized catch of most boats anchoring at the ports. Workmen busied themselves at what soon took on an organised chaos of hauling, weighing and systematically packing fish into large boxes of ice. The sizeable tuna demanded laborious work as weighing scales creaked with their weight and owners stood scribbling numbers and figures on note pads and shouted directives. Heavily packed boxes finally found their way into trucks that stood parked along the way to take them to their destinations. It was soon apparent that it was no less the freshest and the most unspoiled fish that made the cut. The tuna caught here are for exporting to countries like Japan and a variety of fish to other parts of the island.

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After much of the frenetic activity began to slow its pace, even though boat after boat seem to ceaselessly reach the port, hopeful folk gathered around to procure a few of the fresh fish to take home. By late afternoon the last of the fish were being weighed, bounty gathered and tow lines secured. A restful silence dawned across the Kudawella harbour sparing no hints of the bursting activity that had just transpired. Under a sultry afternoon sun boats bobbed gently on the waters – a show of empty haunts.

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