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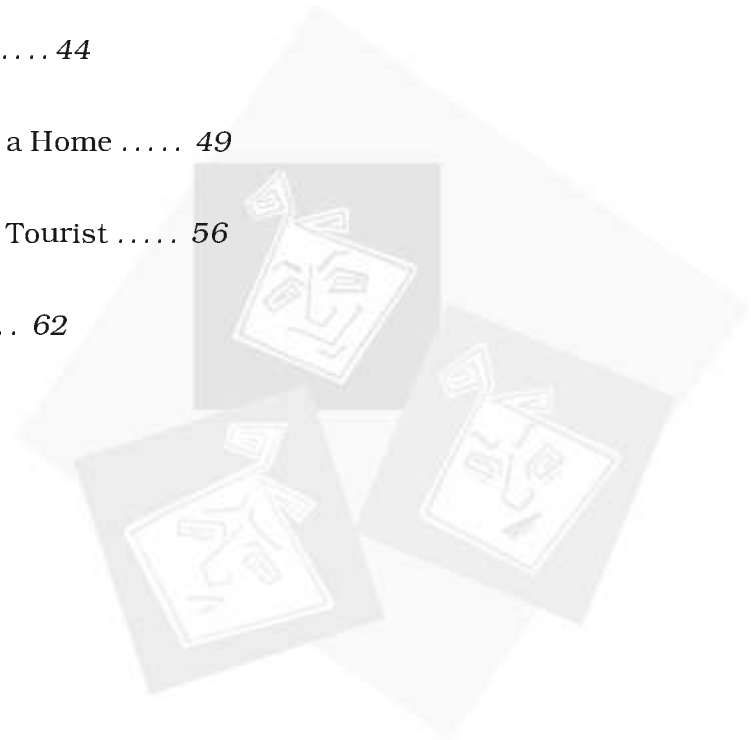


1. The Lost Child

A child goes to a fair with his parents. He is happy and excited and wants the sweets and toys displayed there. But his parents don't buy them for him. Why then does he refuse when someone else offers them to him?

It was the festival of spring. From the wintry shades of narrow lanes and alleys emerged a gaily clad humanity. Some walked, some rode on horses, others sat, being carried in bamboo and bullock carts. One little boy ran between his father's legs, brimming over with life and laughter.

"Come, child, come," called his parents, as he lagged behind, fascinated by the toys in the shops that lined the way.

He hurried towards his parents, his feet obedient to their call, his eyes still lingering on the receding toys. As he came to where they had stopped to wait for him, he could not suppress the desire of his heart, even though he well knew the old, cold stare of refusal in their eyes.

"I want that toy," he pleaded.

His father looked at him red-eyed, in his familiar tyrant's way. His mother, melted by the free spirit of the day was tender and, giving him her finger to hold, said, "Look, child, what is before you!"

It was a flowering mustard-field, pale like melting gold as it swept across miles and miles of even land.

A group of dragon-flies were bustling about on their gaudy purple wings, intercepting the flight of a lone black bee or butterfly in search of sweetness from the flowers. The child followed them in the air with his gaze, till one of them would still its wings and rest, and he would try to catch it. But it would go fluttering, flapping, up into the air, when he had almost caught it in his hands. Then his mother gave a cautionary call: "Come, child, come, come on to the footpath."

He ran towards his parents gaily and walked abreast of them for a while, being, however, soon left behind, attracted by the little insects and worms along the footpath that were teeming out from their hiding places to enjoy the sunshine.

"Come, child, come!" his parents called from the shade of a grove where they had seated themselves on the edge of a well. He ran towards them.

A shower of young flowers fell upon the child as he entered the grove, and, forgetting his parents, he began to gather the raining petals in his hands. But lo! he heard the cooing of doves and ran towards his parents, shouting, "The dove! The dove!" The raining petals dropped from his forgotten hands.

"Come, child, come!" they called to the child, who had now gone running in wild capers round the banyan tree, and gathering him up they took the narrow, winding footpath which led to the fair through the mustard fields.

As they neared the village the child could see many other footpaths full of throngs, converging to the whirlpool of the fair, and felt at once repelled and fascinated by the confusion of the world he was entering.

A sweetmeat seller hawked, "*gulab-jaman, rasagulla, burfi, jalebi*," at the corner of the entrance and a crowd pressed round his counter at the foot of an architecture of many coloured sweets, decorated with leaves of silver and gold. The child stared open-eyed and his mouth watered for the *burfi* that was his favourite sweet. "I want that *burfi*," he slowly murmured. But he half knew as he begged that his plea would not be heeded because his parents would say he was greedy. So without waiting for an answer he moved on.

A flower-seller hawked, "A garland of *gulmohur*, a garland of *gulmohur*!" The child seemed irresistibly drawn. He went towards the basket where the flowers lay heaped and half murmured, "I want that garland." But he well knew his parents would refuse to buy him those flowers because they would say that they were cheap. So, without waiting for an answer, he moved on.

A man stood holding a pole with yellow, red, green and purple balloons flying from it. The child was simply carried away by the rainbow glory of their silken colours and he was filled with an overwhelming desire to possess them all. But he well knew his parents would never buy him the balloons because they would say he was too old to play with such toys. So he walked on farther.

A snake-charmer stood playing a flute to a snake which coiled itself in a basket, its head raised in a graceful bend like the neck of a swan, while the music stole into its invisible ears like the gentle rippling of an invisible waterfall. The child went towards the snake-charmer. But, knowing his parents had forbidden him to hear such coarse music as the snake-charmer played, he proceeded farther.

There was a roundabout in full swing. Men, women and children, carried away in a whirling motion, shrieked and cried with dizzy laughter. The child watched them intently and then he made a bold request: "I want to go on the roundabout, please, Father, Mother."

There was no reply. He turned to look at his parents. They were not there, ahead of him. He turned to look on either side. They were not there. He looked behind. There was no sign of them.

A full, deep cry rose within his dry throat and with a sudden jerk of his body he ran from where he stood, crying in real fear, "Mother, Father." Tears rolled down from his eyes, hot and fierce; his flushed face was convulsed with fear. Panic-stricken, he ran to one side first, then to the other, hither and thither in all directions, knowing not where to go. "Mother, Father," he wailed. His yellow turban came untied and his clothes became muddy.

Having run to and fro in a rage of running for a while, he stood defeated, his cries suppressed into sobs. At little distances on the green grass he could see, through his filmy eyes, men and women talking. He tried to look intently among the patches of bright yellow clothes, but there was no sign of his father and mother among these people, who seemed to laugh and talk just for the sake of laughing and talking.

He ran quickly again, this time to a shrine to which people seemed to be crowding. Every little inch of space here was congested with men, but he ran through people's legs, his little sob lingering: "Mother, Father!" Near the entrance to the temple, however, the crowd became very thick: men jostled each other, heavy men, with flashing, murderous eyes and hefty shoulders. The poor child struggled to thrust a way between their feet but, knocked to and fro by their brutal movements, he might have been trampled underfoot, had he not shrieked at the highest pitch of his voice, "Father, Mother!" A man in the surging crowd heard his cry and, stooping with great difficulty, lifted him up in his arms.

"How did you get here, child? Whose baby are you?" the man asked as he steered clear of the mass. The child wept more bitterly than ever now and only cried, "I want my mother, I want my father!"

The man tried to soothe him by taking him to the roundabout. "Will you have a ride on the horse?" he gently asked as he approached the ring. The child's throat tore into a thousand shrill sobs and he only shouted, "I want my mother, I want my father!"

The man headed towards the place where the snake-charmer still played on the flute to the swaying cobra. "Listen to that nice music, child!" he pleaded. But the child shut his ears with his fingers and shouted his double-pitched strain: "I want my mother, I want my father!" The man took him near the balloons, thinking the bright colours of the balloons would distract the child's attention and quieten him. "Would you like a rainbow-coloured balloon?" he persuasively asked. The child turned his eyes from the flying balloons and just sobbed, "I want my mother, I want my father!"

The man, still trying to make the child happy, bore him to the gate where the flower-seller sat. "Look! Can you smell those nice flowers, child! Would you like a garland to put round your neck?"

The child turned his nose away from the basket and reiterated his sob, "I want my mother, I want my father!"

Thinking to humour his disconsolate charge by a gift of sweets, the man took him to the counter of the sweet shop. "What sweets would you like, child?" he asked. The child turned his face from the sweet shop and only sobbed, "I want my mother, I want my father!"

MULK RAJ ANAND

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What are the things the child sees on his way to the fair? Why does he lag behind?
2. In the fair he wants many things. What are they? Why does he move on without waiting for an answer?
3. When does he realise that he has lost his way? How have his anxiety and insecurity been described?
4. Why does the lost child lose interest in the things that he had wanted earlier?
5. What do you think happens in the end? Does the child find his parents?

TALK ABOUT IT

How to ensure not to get lost.

SUGGESTED READING

- *The Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand
- 'Kabuliwallah' by Rabindranath Tagore

2. The Adventures of Toto

Have you ever had a baby monkey as a pet? Toto is a baby monkey. Let's find out whether he is mischievous or docile.

GRANDFATHER bought Toto from a tonga-driver for the sum of five rupees. The tonga-driver used to keep the little red monkey tied to a feeding-trough, and the monkey looked so out of place there that Grandfather decided he would add the little fellow to his private zoo.

Toto was a pretty monkey. His bright eyes sparkled with mischief beneath deep-set eyebrows, and his teeth, which were a pearly white, were very often displayed in a smile that frightened the life out of elderly Anglo-Indian ladies. But his hands looked dried-up as though they had been pickled in the sun for many years. Yet his fingers were quick and wicked; and his tail, while adding to his good looks (Grandfather believed a tail would add to anyone's good looks), also served as a third hand. He could use it to hang from a branch; and it was capable of scooping up any delicacy that might be out of reach of his hands.

Grandmother always fussed when Grandfather brought home some new bird or animal. So it was decided that Toto's presence should be kept a secret from her until she was in a particularly good mood. Grandfather and I put him away in a little closet opening into my bedroom wall, where he was tied securely — or so we thought — to a peg fastened into the wall.

A few hours later, when Grandfather and I came back to release Toto, we found that the walls, which had been covered with some ornamental paper chosen by Grandfather, now stood out as naked brick and plaster. The peg in the wall had been wrenched from its socket, and my school blazer, which had been hanging there, was in shreds. I wondered what Grandmother

would say. But Grandfather didn't worry; he seemed pleased with Toto's performance.

"He's clever," said Grandfather. "Given time, I'm sure he could have tied the torn pieces of your blazer into a rope, and made his escape from the window!"

His presence in the house still a secret, Toto was now transferred to a big cage in the servants' quarters where a number of Grandfather's pets lived very sociably together — a tortoise, a pair of rabbits, a tame squirrel and, for a while, my pet goat. But the monkey wouldn't allow any of his companions to sleep at night; so Grandfather, who had to leave Dehra Dun next day to collect his pension in Saharanpur, decided to take him along.

Unfortunately I could not accompany Grandfather on that trip, but he told me about it afterwards. A big black canvas kit-bag was provided for Toto. This, with some straw at the bottom, became his new abode. When the bag was closed, there was no escape. Toto could not get his hands through the opening, and the canvas was too strong for him to bite his way through. His efforts to get out only had the effect of making the bag roll about on the floor or occasionally jump into the air — an exhibition that attracted a curious crowd of onlookers on the Dehra Dun railway platform.

Toto remained in the bag as far as Saharanpur, but while Grandfather was producing his ticket at the railway turnstile, Toto suddenly poked his head out of the bag and gave the ticket-collector a wide grin.

The poor man was taken aback; but, with great presence of mind and much to Grandfather's annoyance, he said, "Sir, you have a dog with you. You'll have to pay for it accordingly."

In vain did Grandfather take Toto out of the bag; in vain did he try to prove that a monkey did not qualify as a dog, or even as a quadruped. Toto was classified a dog by the ticket-collector; and three rupees was the sum handed over as his fare.

Then Grandfather, just to get his own back, took from his pocket our pet tortoise, and said, "What must I pay for this, since you charge for all animals?"

The ticket-collector looked closely at the tortoise, prodded it with his forefinger, gave Grandfather a pleased and triumphant look, and said, "No charge. It is not a dog."

When Toto was finally accepted by Grandmother he was given a comfortable home in the stable, where he had for a companion the family donkey, Nana. On Toto's first night in the stable, Grandfather paid him a visit to see if he was comfortable. To his surprise he found Nana, without apparent cause, pulling at her halter and trying to keep her head as far as possible from a bundle of hay.

Grandfather gave Nana a slap across her haunches, and she jerked back, dragging Toto with her. He had fastened on to her long ears with his sharp little teeth.

Toto and Nana never became friends.

A great treat for Toto during cold winter evenings was the large bowl of warm water given him by Grandmother for his bath. He would cunningly test the temperature with his hand, then gradually step into the bath, first one foot, then the other (as he had seen me doing), until he was into the water up to his neck.

Once comfortable, he would take the soap in his hands or feet, and rub himself all over. When the water became cold, he would get out and run as quickly as he could to the kitchen-fire in order to dry himself. If anyone laughed at him during this performance, Toto's feelings would be hurt and he would refuse to go on with his bath. One day Toto nearly succeeded in boiling himself alive.

A large kitchen kettle had been left on the fire to boil for tea and Toto, finding himself with nothing better to do, decided to remove the lid. Finding the water just warm enough for a bath, he got in, with his head sticking out from the open kettle. This was just fine for a while, until the water began to boil. Toto then raised himself a little; but, finding it cold outside, sat down again. He continued hopping up and down for some time, until Grandmother arrived and hauled him, half-boiled, out of the kettle.

If there is a part of the brain especially devoted to mischief, that part was largely developed in Toto. He was always tearing things to pieces. Whenever one of my aunts came near him, he made every effort to get hold of her dress and tear a hole in it.

One day, at lunch-time, a large dish of *pullao* stood in the centre of the dining-table. We entered the room to find Toto stuffing himself with rice. My grandmother screamed — and Toto threw a plate at her. One of my aunts rushed forward — and received a glass of water in the face. When Grandfather arrived, Toto picked up the dish of *pullao* and made his exit through a window. We found him in the branches of the jackfruit tree, the dish still in his arms. He remained there all afternoon, eating slowly through the rice, determined on finishing every grain. And then, in order to spite Grandmother, who had screamed at him, he threw the dish down from the tree, and chattered with delight when it broke into a hundred pieces.

Obviously Toto was not the sort of pet we could keep for long. Even Grandfather realised that. We were not well-to-do, and could not afford the frequent loss of dishes, clothes, curtains and wallpaper. So Grandfather found the tonga-driver, and sold Toto back to him — for only three rupees.

RUSKIN BOND

Glossary

turnstile: a mechanical gate consisting of revolving horizontal arms fixed to a vertical post, allowing only one person at a time to pass through

halter: a rope or strap placed around the head of a horse or other animal, used for leading or tethering it

Think About It

1. How does Toto come to grandfather's private zoo?
2. "Toto was a pretty monkey." In what sense is Toto pretty?
3. Why does grandfather take Toto to Saharanpur and how? Why does the ticket collector insist on calling Toto a dog?
4. How does Toto take a bath? Where has he learnt to do this? How does Toto almost boil himself alive?
5. Why does the author say, "Toto was not the sort of pet we could keep for long"?

Talk About It

Do you have a pet? Is your pet mischievous? Tell the class about it.

Suggested Reading

- *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell
- 'Grandfather's Private Zoo' by Ruskin Bond
- *Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling

3. Iswaran the Storyteller

One night Mahendra woke up from his sleep and saw "a dark cloudy form". He broke out into a cold sweat. Was it a ghost?

THE story was narrated to Ganesh by a young man, Mahendra by name. He was a junior supervisor in a firm which offered on hire supervisors at various types of construction sites: factories, bridges, dams, and so on. Mahendra's job was to keep an eye on the activities at the work site. He had to keep moving from place to place every now and then as ordered by his head office: from a coal mining area to a railway bridge construction site, from there after a few months to a chemical plant which was coming up somewhere.

He was a bachelor. His needs were simple and he was able to adjust himself to all kinds of odd conditions, whether it was an ill-equipped circuit house or a makeshift canvas tent in the middle of a stone quarry. But one asset he had was his cook, Iswaran. The cook was quite attached to Mahendra and followed him uncomplainingly wherever he was posted. He cooked for Mahendra, washed his clothes and chatted away with his master at night. He could weave out endless stories and anecdotes on varied subjects.

Iswaran also had an amazing capacity to produce vegetables and cooking ingredients, seemingly out of nowhere, in the middle of a desolate landscape with no shops visible for miles around. He would miraculously conjure up the most delicious dishes made with fresh vegetables within an hour of arriving at the zinc-sheet shelter at the new workplace.

Mahendra would be up early in the morning and leave for work after breakfast, carrying some prepared food with him. Meanwhile Iswaran would tidy up the shed, wash the clothes, and have a leisurely bath, pouring several buckets of water over his head, muttering a prayer all the while. It would be lunchtime by then. After eating, he would read for a while before dozing off. The book was usually some popular Tamil thriller running to hundreds of pages. Its imaginative descriptions and narrative flourishes would hold Iswaran in thrall.

His own descriptions were greatly influenced by the Tamil authors that he read. When he was narrating even the smallest of incidents, he would try to work in suspense and a surprise ending into the account. For example, instead of saying that he had come across an uprooted tree on the highway, he would say, with eyebrows suitably arched and hands held out in a dramatic gesture, "The road was deserted and I was all alone. Suddenly I spotted something that looked like an enormous bushy beast lying sprawled across the road. I was half inclined to turn and go back. But as I came closer I saw that it was a fallen tree, with its dry branches spread out." Mahendra would stretch himself back in his canvas chair and listen to Iswaran's tales uncritically.

"The place I come from is famous for timber," Iswaran would begin. "There is a richly wooded forest all around. The logs are hauled on to the lorries by elephants. They are huge well-fed beasts. When they turn wild even the most experienced mahout is not able to control them." After this prologue Iswaran would launch into an elaborate anecdote involving an elephant.

"One day a tusker escaped from the timber yard and began to roam about, stamping on bushes, tearing up wild creepers and breaking branches at will. You know, sir, how an elephant behaves when it goes mad." Iswaran would get so caught up in the excitement of his own story that he would get up from the floor and jump about, stamping his feet in emulation of the mad elephant.

"The elephant reached the outskirts of our town; breaking the fences down like matchsticks," he would continue. "It came into the main road and smashed all the stalls selling fruits, mud pots and clothes. People ran helter-skelter in panic! The elephant now entered a school ground where children were playing, breaking through the brick wall. All the boys ran into the classrooms and shut the doors tight. The beast grunted and wandered about, pulling out the football goal-post, tearing down the volleyball net, kicking and flattening the drum kept for water, and uprooting the shrubs. Meanwhile all the teachers had climbed up to the terrace of the school building; from there they helplessly watched the depredations of the elephant. There was not a soul below on the ground. The streets were empty as if the inhabitants of the entire town had suddenly disappeared.

"I was studying in the junior class at that time, and was watching the whole drama from the rooftop. I don't know what came over me suddenly. I grabbed a cane from the hands of one of the teachers and ran down the stairs and into the open. The elephant grunted and menacingly swung a branch of a tree which it held in its trunk. It stamped its feet, kicking up a lot of mud and dust. It looked frightening. But I moved slowly towards it, stick in hand. People were watching the scene hypnotised from nearby housetops. The elephant looked at me red-eyed, ready to rush towards me. It lifted its trunk and trumpeted loudly. At that moment I moved forward and, mustering all my force, whacked

its third toenail on the quick. The beast looked stunned for a moment; then it shivered from head to foot — and collapsed."

At this point Iswaran would leave the story unfinished, and get up mumbling, "I will be back after lighting the gas and warming up the dinner." Mahendra who had been listening with rapt attention would be left hanging. When he returned, Iswaran would not pick up the thread of the story right away. Mahendra would have to remind him that the conclusion was pending. "Well, a veterinary doctor was summoned to revive the animal," Iswaran would shrug casually. "Two days later it was led away by its mahout to the jungle."

"Well, how did you manage to do it, Iswaran — how did you bring down the beast?"

"It has something to do with a Japanese art, I think, sir. Karate or ju-jitsu it is called. I had read about it somewhere. It temporarily paralyses the nervous system, you see."

Not a day passed without Iswaran recounting some story packed with adventure, horror and suspense. Whether the story was credible or not, Mahendra enjoyed listening to it because of the inimitable way in which it was told. Iswaran seemed to more than make up for the absence of a TV in Mahendra's living quarters.

One morning when Mahendra was having breakfast Iswaran asked, "Can I make something special for dinner tonight, sir? After all today is an auspicious day — according to tradition we prepare various delicacies to feed the spirits of our ancestors today, sir."

That night Mahendra enjoyed the most delicious dinner and complimented Iswaran on his culinary skills. He seemed very pleased but, unexpectedly, launched into a most garish account involving the supernatural.

"You know, sir, this entire factory area we are occupying was once a burial ground," he started. Mahendra was jerked out of the pleasant reverie he had drifted into after the satisfying meal.

"I knew on the first day itself when I saw a human skull lying on the path. Even now I come across a number of skulls and bones," Iswaran continued.

He went on to narrate how he sometimes saw ghosts at night. "I am not easily frightened by these things, sir. I am a brave fellow. But one horrible ghost of a woman which appears off and on at midnight during the full moon... It is an ugly creature with matted hair and a shrivelled face, like a skeleton holding a foetus in its arms."

Mahendra shivered at the description and interrupted rather sharply, "You are crazy, Iswaran. There are no such things as ghosts or spirits. It is all a figment of your imagination. Get your digestive system examined — and maybe your head as well. You are talking nonsense."

He left the room and retired for the night, expecting Iswaran to sulk for a couple of days. But the next morning he was surprised to find the cook as cheerful and talkative as ever.

From that day on Mahendra, for all his brave talk, went to bed with a certain unease. Every night he peered into the darkness

outside through the window next to his bed, trying to make sure that there was no movement of dark shapes in the vicinity. But he could only see a sea of darkness with the twinkling lights of the factory miles away.

He had always liked to admire the milk-white landscape on full-moon nights. But after hearing Iswaran's story of the female ghost he avoided looking out of his window altogether when the moon was full.

One night, Mahendra was woken up from his sleep by a low moan close to his window. At first he put it down to a cat prowling around for mice. But the sound was too guttural for a cat. He resisted the curiosity to look out lest he should behold a sight which would stop his heart. But the wailing became louder and less feline. He could not resist the temptation any more. Lowering himself to the level of the windowsill he looked out at the white sheet of moonlight outside. There, not too far away, was a dark cloudy form clutching a bundle. Mahendra broke into a cold sweat and fell back on the pillow, panting. As he gradually recovered from the ghastly experience he began to reason with himself, and finally concluded that it must have been some sort of auto suggestion, some trick that his subconscious had played on him.

By the time he had got up in the morning, had a bath and come out to have his breakfast, the horror of the previous night had faded from his memory. Iswaran greeted him at the door with his lunch packet and his bag. Just as Mahendra was stepping out Iswaran grinned and said, "Sir, remember the other day when I was telling you about the female ghost with a foetus in its arms, you were so angry with me for imagining things? Well, you saw her yourself last night. I came running hearing the sound of moaning that was coming from your room..."

A chill went down Mahendra's spine. He did not wait for Iswaran to complete his sentence. He hurried away to his office and handed in his papers, resolving to leave the haunted place the very next day!

R.K. LAXMAN

Glossary

in thrall: the state of being in someone's power
depredations: attacks which are made to destroy something
guttural sound: sound produced in the throat; harsh-sounding
feline: relating to cats or other members of the cat family

Think About It

1. In what way is Iswaran an asset to Mahendra?
2. How does Iswaran describe the uprooted tree on the highway? What effect does he want to create in his listeners?
3. How does he narrate the story of the tusker? Does it appear to be plausible?
4. Why does the author say that Iswaran seemed to more than make up for the absence of a TV in Mahendra's living quarters?
5. Mahendra calls ghosts or spirits a figment of the imagination. What happens to him on a full-moon night?
6. Can you think of some other ending for the story?

Talk About It

Is Iswaran a fascinating storyteller? Discuss with your friends the qualities of a good storyteller. Try to use these qualities and tell a story.

Suggested Reading

- 'The Story Teller' by Saki (H.H. Munro)
- *Ghost Stories* (ed.) Ruskin Bond
- 'The Canterville Ghost' by Oscar Wilde
- 'Pret in the House' by Ruskin Bond

4. In the Kingdom of Fools

It is believed that fools are so dangerous that only very wise people can manage them. Who are the fools in this story? What happens to them?

IN the Kingdom of Fools, both the king and the minister were idiots. They didn't want to run things like other kings, so they decided to change night into day and day into night. They ordered that everyone should be awake at night, till their fields and run their businesses only after dark, and go to bed as soon as the sun came up. Anyone who disobeyed would be punished with death. The people did as they were told for fear of death. The king and the minister were delighted at the success of their project. One day a guru and his disciple arrived in the city. It was a beautiful city, it was broad daylight, but there was no one about. Everyone was asleep, not a mouse stirring. Even the cattle had been taught to sleep by day. The two strangers were amazed by what they saw around them and wandered around town till evening, when suddenly the whole town woke up and went about its nightly business.

The two men were hungry. Now that the shops were open, they went to buy some groceries. To their astonishment, they found that everything cost the same, a single *duddu* — whether they bought a measure of rice or a bunch of bananas, it cost a *duddu*. The guru and his disciple were delighted. They had never heard of anything like this. They could buy all the food they wanted for a rupee.

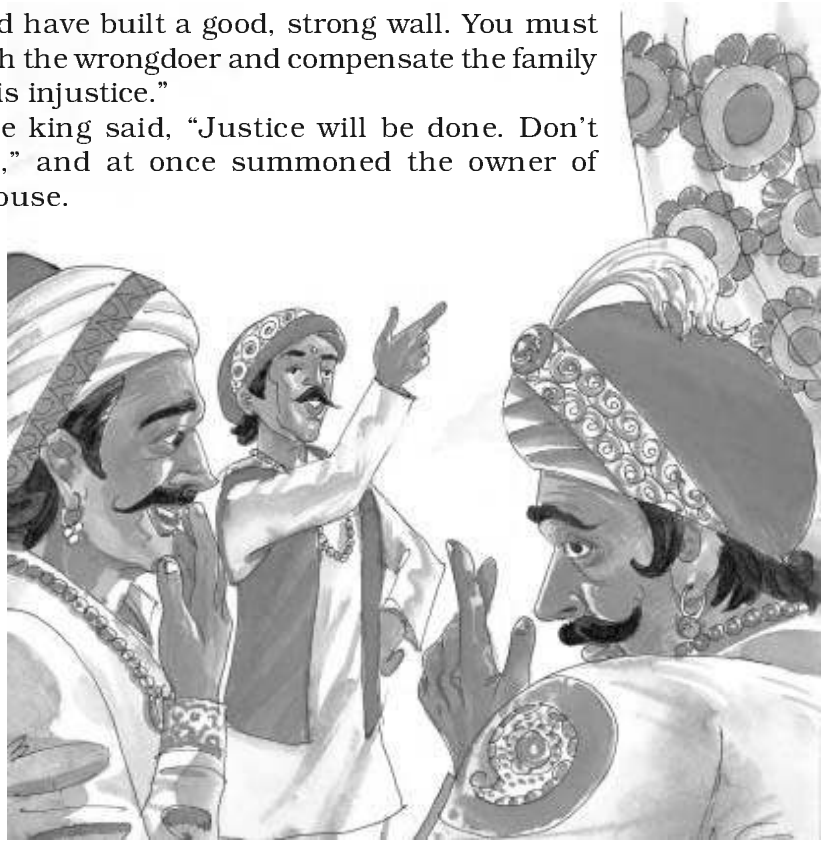
When they had cooked and eaten, the guru realised that this was a kingdom of fools and it wouldn't be a good idea for them to stay there. "This is no place for us. Let's go," he said to his disciple. But the disciple didn't want to leave the place. Everything was cheap here. All he wanted was good, cheap food. The guru said,

"They are all fools. This won't last very long, and you can't tell what they'll do to you next."

But the disciple wouldn't listen to the guru's wisdom. He wanted to stay. The guru finally gave up and said, "Do what you want. I'm going," and left. The disciple stayed on, ate his fill every day — bananas and ghee and rice and wheat, and grew fat like a street-side sacred bull.

One bright day, a thief broke into a rich merchant's house. He had made a hole in the wall and sneaked in, and as he was carrying out his loot, the wall of the old house collapsed on his head and killed him on the spot. His brother ran to the king and complained, "Your Highness, when my brother was pursuing his ancient trade, a wall fell on him and killed him. This merchant is to blame. He should have built a good, strong wall. You must punish the wrongdoer and compensate the family for this injustice."

The king said, "Justice will be done. Don't worry," and at once summoned the owner of the house.



When the merchant arrived, the king questioned him.

"What's your name?"

"Such and Such, Your Highness."

"Were you at home when the dead man burgled your house?"

"Yes, My Lord. He broke in and the wall was weak. It fell on him."

"The accused pleads guilty. Your wall killed this man's brother. You have murdered a man. We have to punish you."

"Lord," said the helpless merchant, "I didn't put up the wall. It's really the fault of the man who built the wall. He didn't build it right. You should punish him."

"Who is that?"

"My Lord, this wall was built in my father's time. I know the man. He's an old man now. He lives nearby."

The king sent out messengers to bring in the bricklayer who had built the wall. They brought him, tied hand and foot.

"You there, did you build this man's wall in his father's time?"

"Yes, My Lord, I did."

"What kind of a wall is this that you built? It has fallen on a poor man and killed him. You've murdered him. We have to punish you by death."

Before the king could order the execution, the poor bricklayer pleaded, "Please listen to me before you give your orders. It's true I built this wall and it was no good. But that was because my mind was not on it. I remember very well a dancing girl who was going up and down that street all day with her anklets jingling, and I couldn't keep my eyes or my mind on the wall I was building. You must get that dancing girl. I know where she lives."

"You're right. The case deepens. We must look into it. It is not easy to judge such complicated cases. Let's get that dancer, wherever she is."

The dancing girl, now an old woman, came trembling to the court.

"Did you walk up and down that street many years ago, while this poor man was building a wall? Did you see him?"

"Yes, My Lord, I remember it very well."

"So you did walk up and down, with your anklets jingling. You were young and you distracted him, so he built a bad wall.

It has fallen on a poor burglar and killed him. You've killed an innocent man. You'll have to be punished."

She thought for a minute and said, "My Lord, wait. I know now why I was walking up and down that street. I had given some gold to the goldsmith to make some jewellery for me. He was a lazy scoundrel. He made so many excuses, said he would give it now and he would give it then and so on all day. He made me walk up and down to his house a dozen times. That was when this bricklayer saw me. It's not my fault, My Lord, it's the damned goldsmith's fault."

"Poor thing, she's absolutely right," thought the king, weighing the evidence. "We've got the real culprit at last. Get the goldsmith, wherever he is hiding. At once!"

The king's bailiffs searched for the goldsmith, who was hiding in a corner of his shop. When he heard the accusation against him, he had his own story to tell.

"My Lord," he said, "I'm a poor goldsmith. It's true I made this dancer come many times to my door. I gave her excuses because I couldn't finish making her jewellery before I finished the rich merchant's orders. They had a wedding coming, and they wouldn't wait. You know how impatient rich men are!"

"Who is this rich merchant who kept you from finishing this poor woman's jewellery, made her walk up and down, which distracted this bricklayer, which made a mess of his wall, which has now

fallen on an innocent man and killed him? Can you name him?"

The goldsmith named the merchant, and he was none other than the original owner of the house whose wall had fallen. Now justice had come full circle, thought the king, back to the merchant. When he was rudely summoned back to the court, he arrived crying, "It wasn't me but my father who ordered the jewellery! He's dead! I'm innocent!"

But the king consulted his minister and ruled decisively: "It's true your father is the true murderer. He's dead, but somebody must be punished in his place. You've inherited everything from that criminal father of yours, his riches as well as his sins. I knew at once, even when I first set eyes on you, that you were at the root of this horrible crime. You must die."

And he ordered a new stake to be made ready for the execution. As the servants sharpened the stake and got it ready for the final impaling of the criminal, it occurred to the minister that the rich merchant was somehow too thin to be properly executed on the stake. He appealed to the king's common sense. The king too worried about it.

"What shall we do?" he said, when suddenly it struck him that all they needed to do was to find a man fat enough to fit the stake. The servants were immediately sent all over the town looking for a man who would fit the stake, and their eyes fell on the disciple who had fattened himself for months on bananas and rice and wheat and ghee.

"What have I done wrong? I'm innocent. I'm a sanyasi!" he cried.

"That may be true. But it's the royal decree that we should find a man fat enough to fit the stake," they said, and carried him to the place of execution. He remembered his wise guru's words: "This is a city of fools. You don't know what they will do next." While he was waiting for death, he prayed to his guru in his heart, asking him to hear his cry wherever he was. The guru saw everything in a vision; he had magic powers, he could see far, and he could see the future as he could see the present and the past. He arrived at once to save his disciple, who had got himself into such a scrape through love of food.

As soon as he arrived, he scolded the disciple and told him something in a whisper. Then he went to the king and addressed him, "O wisest of kings, who is greater? The guru or the disciple?"

"Of course, the guru. No doubt about it. Why do you ask?"

"Then put me to the stake first. Put my disciple to death after me."

When the disciple heard this, he understood and began to clamour, "Me first! You brought me here first! Put me to death first, not him!"

The guru and the disciple now got into a fight about who should go first. The king was puzzled by this behaviour. He asked the guru, "Why do you want to die? We chose him because we needed a fat man for the stake."

"You shouldn't ask me such questions. Put me to death first," replied the guru.

"Why? There's some mystery here. As a wise man you must make me understand."

"Will you promise to put me to death if I tell you?" asked the guru. The king gave him his solemn word. The guru took him aside, out of the servants' earshot, and whispered to him, "Do you know why we want to die right now, the two of us? We've been all over the world but we've never found a city like this or a king like you. That stake is the stake of the god of justice. It's new, it has never had a criminal on it. Whoever dies on it first will be reborn as the king of this country. And whoever goes next will be the future minister of this country. We're sick of our ascetic life. It would be nice to enjoy ourselves as king and minister for a while. Now keep your word, My Lord, and put us to death. Me first, remember?"

The king was now thrown into deep thought. He didn't want to lose the kingdom to someone else in the next round of life. He needed time. So he ordered the execution postponed to the next day and talked in secret with his minister. "It's not right for us to give over the kingdom to others in the next life. Let's go on the stake ourselves and we'll be reborn as king and minister again. Holy men do not tell lies," he said, and the minister agreed.

So he told the executioners, "We'll send the criminals tonight. When the first man comes to you, put him to death first. Then do the same to the second man. Those are my orders. Don't make any mistake."

That night, the king and his minister went secretly to the prison, released the guru and the disciple, disguised themselves as the two, and as arranged beforehand with loyal servants, were taken to the stake and promptly executed.

When the bodies were taken down to be thrown to crows and vultures the people panicked. They saw before them the dead bodies of the king and the minister. The city was in confusion.

All night they mourned and discussed the future of the kingdom. Some people suddenly thought of the guru and the disciple and caught up with them as they were preparing to leave town unnoticed. "We people need a king and a minister," said someone. Others agreed. They begged the guru and the disciple to be their king and their minister. It didn't take many arguments to persuade the disciple, but it took longer to persuade the guru. They finally agreed to rule the kingdom of the foolish king and the silly minister, on the condition that they could change all the old laws.

From then on, night would again be night and day would again be day, and you could get nothing for a *duddu*. It became like any other place.

[*A Kannada folktale from A.K. Ramanujan's*
Folk Tales from India]

Glossary

bailiff: a law officer who makes sure that the decisions of a court are obeyed

scrape: a difficult situation that one has got into

Think About It

1. What are the two strange things the guru and his disciple find in the Kingdom of Fools?
2. Why does the disciple decide to stay in the Kingdom of Fools? Is it a good idea?
3. Name all the people who are tried in the king's court, and give the reasons for their trial.
4. Who is the real culprit according to the king? Why does he escape punishment?
5. What are the Guru's words of wisdom? When does the disciple remember them?
6. How does the guru manage to save his disciple's life?

Talk About It

In Shakespeare's plays the fool is not really foolish. If you have read or seen Shakespeare's plays such as *King Lear, As You Like It, Twelfth Night,* you may talk about the role of the fool.

Do you know any stories in your language about wise fools, such as Tenali Rama or Gopal Bhar? You can also read about them in Ramanujan's collection of folk tales.

Suggested Reading

- *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb
- *Folk Tales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages* Selected and Edited by A.K. Ramanujan
- *Classic Folk Tales from Around the World* Edited by Robert Nye

5. The Happy Prince

The Happy Prince was a beautiful statue. He was covered with gold, he had sapphires for eyes, and a ruby in his sword. Why did he want to part with all the gold that he had, and his precious stones?

HIGH above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince. He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword hilt.

One night there flew over the city a little swallow. His friends had gone away to Egypt six weeks before, but he had stayed behind; then he decided to go to Egypt too.

All day long he flew, and at night time he arrived at the city.

"Where shall I put up?" he said. "I hope the town has made preparations."

Then he saw the statue on the tall column.

"I will put up there," he cried. "It is a fine position with plenty of fresh air." So he alighted just between the feet of the Happy Prince.

"I have a golden bed-room," he said softly to himself as he looked round, and he

prepared to go to sleep; but just as he was putting his head under his wing a large drop of water fell on him. "What a curious thing!" he cried. "There is not a single cloud in the sky, the stars are quite clear and bright, and yet it is raining."

Then another drop fell.

"What is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?" he said. "I must look for a good chimney pot," and he determined to fly away.

But before he had opened his wings, a third drop fell, and he looked up, and saw — Ah! What did he see?

The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little swallow was filled with pity.

"Who are you?" he said.

"I am the Happy Prince."

"Why are you weeping then?" asked the swallow. "You have quite drenched me."

"When I was alive and had a human heart," answered the statue, "I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep."

'What! Is he not solid gold?' said the swallow to himself. He was too polite to make any personal remarks.

"Far away," continued the statue in a low musical voice, "far away in a little street there is a poor house. One of the windows is open, and through it I can see a woman seated at a table. Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress. She is embroidering flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the Queen's maids of honour, to wear at the next Court ball. In a bed in the corner of the room her little boy is lying ill. He has a fever, and is asking his mother to give him oranges. His mother has nothing to give him but river water, so he is crying. Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, will you not bring her the ruby out of my sword hilt? My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move."

"I am waited for in Egypt," said the swallow. "My friends are flying up and down the Nile, and talking to the large lotus flowers. Soon they will go to sleep."

The Prince asked the swallow to stay with him for one night and be his messenger. "The boy is so thirsty, and the mother so sad," he said.

"I don't think I like boys," answered the swallow. "I want to go to Egypt."

But the Happy Prince looked so sad that the little swallow was sorry. "It is very cold here," he said. But he agreed to stay with him for one night and be his messenger.

"Thank you, little Swallow," said the Prince.

The swallow picked out the great ruby from the Prince's sword, and flew away with it in his beak over the roofs of the town.

He passed by the cathedral tower, where the white marble angels were sculptured. He passed by the palace and heard the sound of dancing. A beautiful girl came out on the balcony with her lover.

"I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State ball," she said. "I have ordered flowers to be embroidered on it, but the seamstresses are so lazy."

He passed over the river, and saw the lanterns hanging on the masts of the ships. At last he came to the poor woman's house and looked in. The boy was tossing feverishly on his bed, and the mother had fallen asleep, she was so tired. In he hopped, and laid the great ruby on the table beside the woman's thimble. Then he flew gently round the bed, fanning the boy's forehead with his wings. "How cool I feel!" said the boy, "I must be getting better;" and he sank into a delicious slumber.

Then the swallow flew back to the Happy Prince, and told him what he had done. "It is curious," he remarked, "but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold."

"That is because you have done a good action," said the Prince. And the little swallow began to think, and then fell asleep. Thinking always made him sleepy.

When day broke he flew down to the river and had a bath. "Tonight I go to Egypt," said the swallow, and he was in high

spirits at the prospect. He visited all the monuments and sat a long time on top of the church steeple.

When the moon rose he flew back to the Happy Prince.

"Have you any commissions for Egypt?" he cried. "I am just starting."

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "will you stay with me one night longer?"

"I am waited for in Egypt," answered the swallow.

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "far away across the city I see a young man in a garret. He is leaning over a desk covered with papers, and in the glass by his side there is a bunch of withered violets. His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as a pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes. He is trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre, but he is too cold to write any more. There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint."

"I will wait with you one night longer," said the swallow, who really had a good heart. He asked if he should take another ruby to the young playwright.

"Alas! I have no ruby now," said the Prince. "My eyes are all that I have left. They are made of rare sapphires, which were

brought out of India a thousand years ago." He ordered the swallow to pluck out one of them and take it to the playwright. "He will sell it to the jeweller, and buy firewood, and finish his play," he said.

"Dear Prince," said the swallow, "I cannot do that," and he began to weep.

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "do as I command you."

So the swallow plucked out the Prince's eye, and flew away to the young man's garret. It was easy enough to get in, as there was a hole in the roof. Through this he darted, and came into the room. The young man had his head buried in his hands, so he did not hear the flutter of the bird's wings, and when he looked up he found the beautiful sapphire lying on the withered violets.

"I am beginning to be appreciated," he cried. "This is from some great admirer. Now I can finish my play," and he looked quite happy.

The next day the swallow flew down to the harbour. He sat on the mast of a large vessel and watched the sailors working. "I am going to Egypt," cried the swallow, but nobody minded, and when the moon rose he flew back to the Happy Prince.

"I have come to bid you goodbye," he cried.

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "will you not stay with me one night longer?"

"It is winter," answered the swallow, "and the snow will soon be here. In Egypt the sun is warm on the green palm trees, and the crocodiles lie in the mud and look lazily about them."

"In the square below," said the Happy Prince, "there stands a little matchgirl. She has let her matches fall in the gutter, and they are all spoiled. Her father will beat her if she does not bring home some money, and she is crying. She has no shoes or

stockings, and her little head is bare. Pluck out my other eye, and give it to her, and her father will not beat her."

"I will stay with you one night longer," said the swallow, "but I cannot pluck out your eye. You would be quite blind then."

"Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow," said the Prince, "do as I command you."

So he plucked out the Prince's other eye, and darted down with it. He swooped past the matchgirl, and slipped the jewel into the palm of her hand.

"What a lovely bit of glass!" cried the little girl; and she ran home, laughing.

Then the swallow came back to the Prince. "You are blind now," he said, "so I will stay with you always."

"No, little Swallow," said the poor Prince, "you must go away to Egypt."

"No, I will stay with you always," said the swallow, and he slept at the Prince's feet.

All the next day he sat on the Prince's shoulder, and told him stories of what he had seen in strange lands.

"Dear little Swallow," said the Prince, "you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery. Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there."

So the swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in each other's arms to try and keep themselves warm. "How hungry we are!" they said. "You must not lie here," shouted the watchman, and they wandered out into the rain.

Then he flew back and told the Prince what he had seen.

"I am covered with fine gold," said the Prince. "You must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to the poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy."

Leaf after leaf of the fine gold the swallow picked off, till the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey. Leaf after leaf of the

fine gold he brought to the poor, and the children's faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played in the street. "We have bread now!" they cried.

Then the snow came, and after the snow came the frost. The streets looked as if they were made of silver. Everybody went about in furs, and the little boys wore scarlet caps and skated on the ice.

The poor little swallow grew colder and colder, but he would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well. He picked up crumbs outside the baker's door when the baker was not looking, and tried to keep himself warm by flapping his wings.

But at last he knew that he was going to die. He had just enough strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. "Goodbye, dear Prince!" he murmured. "Will you let me kiss your hand?

"I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow," said the Prince. "You have stayed too long here but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you."

"It is not to Egypt that I am going," said the swallow. "I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?"

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet.

At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost.

Early the next morning the Mayor was walking in the square below in company with the Town Councillors. As they passed the column he looked up at the statue. "Dear me! How shabby the Happy Prince looks!" he said.

"How shabby, indeed!" cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor and they went up to look at it.

"The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer," said the Mayor. "In fact, he is little better than a beggar!"

"Little better than a beggar," said the Town Councillors.

"And here is actually a dead bird at his feet!" continued the Mayor. "We must really issue a proclamation that birds are not

to be allowed to die here." And the Town Clerk made a note of the suggestion.

So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince. "As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful," said the Art Professor at the University.

Then they melted the statue in a furnace. "What a strange thing!" said the overseer of the workmen at the foundry. "This broken lead heart will not melt in the furnace. We must throw it away." So they threw it on a dust heap where the dead swallow was also lying.

"Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

"You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for ever more and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me."

OSCAR WILDE

Glossary

seamstress: a woman who makes a living by sewing

thimble: a metal or plastic cap with a closed end, worn to protect the finger and push the needle in sewing

garret: small dark room at the top of the house

Think About It

1. Why do the courtiers call the prince 'the Happy Prince'? Is he really happy? What does he see all around him?
2. Why does the Happy Prince send a ruby for the seamstress? What does the swallow do in the seamstress' house?
3. For whom does the prince send the sapphires and why?
4. What does the swallow see when it flies over the city?
5. Why did the swallow not leave the prince and go to Egypt?
6. What are the precious things mentioned in the story? Why are they precious?

Talk About It

The little swallow says, "It is curious, but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold." Have you ever had such a feeling? Share your experience with your friends.

Suggested Reading

- 'The Selfish Giant' by Oscar Wilde.
- 'How Much Land Does a Man Require?' by Leo Tolstoy

6. Weathering the Storm in Ersama

The cyclone that hit Orissa in October 1999 killed thousands of people and devastated hundreds of villages. For two dreadful nights Prashant, a young man, was marooned on the roof of a house. On the third day he decided to go to his village. Did he find his family?

On 27 October 1999, seven years after his mother's death, Prashant had gone to the block headquarters of Ersama, a small town in coastal Orissa, some eighteen kilometres from his village, to spend the day with a friend. In the evening, a dark and menacing storm quickly gathered. Winds beat against the houses with a speed and fury that Prashant had never witnessed before. Heavy and incessant rain filled the darkness, ancient trees were

uprooted and crashed to the earth. Screams rent the air as people and houses were swiftly washed away. The angry waters swirled into his friend's house, neck deep. The building was of brick and mortar and was strong enough to survive the devastation of the wind's velocity of 350 km per hour. But the cold terror of the family grew with the crashing of trees that had got uprooted and fallen on their house, some time in the middle of the night, damaging its roof and walls.

The crazed destruction wrought by the cyclone and the surge of the ocean continued for the next thirty-six hours, although wind speeds had reduced somewhat by the next morning. To escape the waters rising in the house, Prashant and his friend's family had taken refuge on the roof. Prashant will never forget the shock he experienced at his first glimpse of the devastation wrought by the super cyclone, in the grey light of the early morning. A raging, deadly, brown sheet of water covered everything as far as the eye could see; only fractured cement houses still stood in a few places. Bloated animal carcasses and human corpses floated in every direction. All round even huge old trees had fallen. Two coconut trees had fallen on the roof of their house. This was a blessing in disguise, because the tender coconuts from the trees kept the trapped family from starving in the several days that followed.

For the next two days, Prashant sat huddled with his friend's family in the open on the rooftop. They froze in the cold and incessant rain; the rain water washed away Prashant's tears. The only thought that flashed through his mind was whether his family had survived the fury of the super cyclone. Was he to be bereaved once again?

Two days later, which seemed to Prashant like two years, the rain ceased and the rain waters slowly began to recede. Prashant was determined to seek out his family without further delay. But the situation was still dangerous, and his friend's family pleaded with Prashant to stay back a little while longer. But Prashant knew he had to go.

He equipped himself with a long, sturdy stick, and then started on his eighteen-kilometre expedition back to his village through the swollen flood waters. It was a journey he would never forget. He constantly had to use his stick to locate the road, to determine

where the water was most shallow. At places it was waist deep, and progress was slow. At several points, he lost the road and had to swim. After some distance, he was relieved to find two friends of his uncle who were also returning to their village. They decided to move ahead together.

As they waded through the waters, the scenes they witnessed grew more and more macabre. They had to push away many human bodies — men, women, children — and carcasses of dogs, goats and cattle that the current swept against them as they moved ahead. In every village that they passed, they could barely see a house standing. Prashant now wept out loud and long. He was sure that his family could not have survived this catastrophe.

Eventually, Prashant reached his village, Kalikuda. His heart went cold. Where their home once stood, there were only remnants of its roof. Some of their belongings were caught, mangled and twisted in the branches of trees just visible above the dark waters. Young Prashant decided to go to the Red Cross shelter to look for his family.

Among the first people he saw in the crowd was his maternal grandmother. Weak with hunger, she rushed to him, her hands outstretched, her eyes brimming. It was a miracle. They had long given him up for dead.

Quickly word spread and his extended family gathered around him, and hugged him tight in relief. Prashant anxiously scanned the motley, battered group. His brother and sister, his uncles and aunts, they all seemed to be there.

By the next morning, as he took in the desperate situation in the shelter, he decided to get a grip over himself. He sensed a deathly grief settling upon the 2500 strong crowd in the shelter. Eighty-six lives were lost in the village. All the ninety-six houses had been washed away. It was their fourth day at the shelter. So far they had survived on green coconuts, but there were too few to go around such a tumult of people.

Prashant, all of nineteen years, decided to step in as leader of his village, if no one else did. He organised a group of youths and elders to jointly pressurise the merchant once again to part with his rice. This time the delegation succeeded and returned triumphantly, wading through the receding waters with food for the entire shelter. No one cared that the rice was already rotting. Branches from fallen trees were gathered to light a reluctant and slow fire, on which to cook the rice. For the first time in four days, the survivors at the cyclone shelter were able to fill their bellies. His next task was to organise a team of youth volunteers to clean the shelter of filth, urine, vomit and floating carcasses, and to tend to the wounds and fractures of the many who had been injured.

On the fifth day, a military helicopter flew over the shelter and dropped some food parcels. It then did not return. The youth task force gathered empty

utensils from the shelter. Then they deputed the children to lie in the sand left by the waters around the shelter with these utensils on their stomachs, to communicate to the passing helicopters that they were hungry. The message got through, and after that the helicopter made regular rounds of the shelter, airdropping food and other basic needs.

Prashant found that a large number of children had been orphaned. He brought them together and put up a polythene sheet shelter for them. Women were mobilised to look after them, while the men secured food and materials for the shelter.

As the weeks passed, Prashant was quick to recognise that the women and children were sinking deeper and deeper in their grief. He persuaded the women to start working in the food-for-work programme started by an NGO, and for the children he organised sports events. He himself loved to play cricket, and so he organised cricket matches for children. Prashant engaged, with other volunteers, in helping the widows and children to pick up the broken pieces of their lives. The initial government plan was to set up institutions for orphans and widows. However, this step was successfully resisted, as it was felt that in such institutions, children would grow up without love, and widows

would suffer from stigma and loneliness. Prashant's group believed orphans should be resettled in their own community itself, possibly in new foster families made up of childless widows and children without adult care.

It is six months after the devastation of the super cyclone. This time Prashant's wounded spirit has healed simply because he had no time to bother about his own pain. His handsome, youthful face is what the widows and orphaned children of his village seek out most in their darkest hour of grief.

HARSH MANDER

Glossary

menacing: dangerous and harmful
incessant: unceasing; continual
swirled: moved or flowed along with a whirling motion
carcasses: dead bodies of animals
bereaved: lost a close relation or friend through his/her death
remnants: small remaining quantities
motley: disparate; varied in appearance or character
tumult: uproar of a disorderly crowd

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What havoc has the super cyclone wreaked in the life of the people of Orissa?
2. How has Prashant, a teenager, been able to help the people of his village?
3. How have the people of the community helped one another? What role do the women of Kalikuda play during these days?
4. Why do Prashant and other volunteers resist the plan to set up institutions for orphans and widows? What alternatives do they consider?

5. Do you think Prashant is a good leader? Do you think young people can get together to help people during natural calamities?

Talk About It

Talk about the preparedness of the community for a natural disaster.

(You can talk about evacuation plans and rehabilitation; permanent safe shelters; warning systems; relief efforts; building materials to withstand cyclone/flood/earthquake, i.e. safe housing; peoples' organisation of their own rescue; the survival instinct, etc.)

Suggested Reading

- 'A Home on the Street' by Harsh Mander
- 'Paying for His Tea' by Harsh Mander
- *Eton Munda Won the Battle* by Mahasweta Devi

7. The Last Leaf

It is autumn. The wind is blowing hard and it is raining heavily. All the leaves on an ivy creeper have fallen, except one. Why doesn't the last leaf fall?

SUE and Johnsy, two young artists, shared a small flat. The flat was on the third storey of an old house.

Johnsy fell very seriously ill in November. She had pneumonia. She would lie in her bed without moving, just gazing out of the window. Sue, her friend, became very worried. She sent for the doctor. Although he came every day there was no change in Johnsy's condition.

One day the doctor took Sue aside and asked her, "Is anything worrying Johnsy?"

"No," replied Sue. "But why do you ask?"

The doctor said "Johnsy, it seems, has made up her mind that she is not going to get well. If she doesn't want to live, medicines will not help her."

Sue tried her best to make Johnsy take an interest in things around her. She talked about clothes and fashions, but Johnsy did not respond. Johnsy continued to lie still on her bed. Sue brought her drawing-board into Johnsy's room and started painting. To take Johnsy's mind off her illness, she whistled while working.

Suddenly Sue heard Johnsy whisper something. She quickly rushed to the bed and heard Johnsy counting backwards. She was looking out of the window and was saying, "Twelve!" After sometime she whispered "eleven", then "ten", then "nine", "eight", "seven". Sue anxiously looked out of the window. She saw an old ivy creeper climbing half-way up the brick wall opposite their window. In the strong wind outside, the creeper was shedding its leaves.

"What is it, dear?" Sue asked.

"Six," whispered Johnsy. "They are falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred leaves. There are only five left now."

"It is autumn," said Sue, "and the leaves will fall."

"When the last leaf falls, I will die," said Johnsy with finality. "I have known this for the last three days."

"Oh, that's nonsense," replied Sue. "What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well? The doctor is confident that you will get better."

Johnsy did not say anything. Sue went and brought her a bowl of soup.

"I don't want any soup," said Johnsy. "I am not hungry... Now there are only four leaves left. I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark. Then I will sleep forever."

Sue sat on Johnsy's bed, kissed her and said, "You are not going to die. I can't draw the curtain for I need the light. I want to finish the painting and get some money for us. Please, my dear

friend," she begged Johnsy, "promise not to look out of the window while I paint."

"All right," said Johnsy. "Finish your painting soon for I want to see the last leaf fall. I'm tired of waiting. I have to die, so let me go away peacefully like one of those poor, tired leaves."

"Try to sleep," said Sue. "I have to paint an old miner. I will call Behrman up to be my model."

Sue rushed down. Behrman lived on the ground floor.

He was a sixty-year-old painter. His lifelong dream was to paint a masterpiece but that had remained a dream. Sue poured out her worries to Behrman. She told him how Johnsy was convinced that she would die when the last leaf fell.

"Is she stupid?" asked Behrman. "How can she be so foolish?"

"She is running a high temperature,"complained Sue. "She refuses to eat or drink and that worries me a lot."

"I will come with you and see Johnsy," Behrman said.

They tiptoed into the room. Johnsy was sleeping. Sue drew the curtains together and they went to the next room. She peeped out through the window. There was only one leaf on the creeper. It was raining heavily and an icy-cold wind was blowing. It seemed as though the leaf would fall any minute now. Behrman did not say a word. He went back to his room.

Johnsy woke up next morning. In a feeble voice she asked Sue to draw the curtains. Sue was nervous. She drew back the curtains very reluctantly.

"Oh!" Sue exclaimed as she looked at the vine creeper. "Look, there is still one leaf

on the creeper. It looks quite green and healthy. In spite of the storm and the fierce winds, it didn't fall."

"I heard the wind last night," said Johnsy. "I thought it would have fallen. It will surely fall today. Then I'll die."

"You won't die," said Sue energetically. "You have to live for your friends. What would happen to me if you die?"

Johnsy smiled weakly and closed her eyes. After every hour or so she would look out of the window and find the leaf still there. It seemed to be clinging to the creeper.

In the evening, there was another storm but the leaf did not fall. Johnsy lay for a long time looking at the leaf. Then she called out to Sue.

"I have been a bad girl. You have looked after me so lovingly and I have not cooperated with you. I have been depressed and gloomy. The last leaf has shown me how wicked I have been. I have realised that it is a sin to want to die."

Sue hugged Johnsy. Then she gave her lots of hot soup and a mirror. Johnsy combed her hair and smiled brightly.

In the afternoon the doctor came. After examining his patient he told Sue, "Johnsy now has the will to live. I am confident she'll recover soon. Now I must go downstairs and see Behrman. He is also suffering from pneumonia. But I am afraid, there is no hope for him."

The next morning Sue came and sat on Johnsy's bed. Taking Johnsy's hand in hers she said, "I have something to tell you. Mr Behrman died of pneumonia this morning. He was ill for only two days. The first day the janitor found him on his bed. His clothes and shoes were wet and he was shivering. He had been out in that stormy night."

Then they found a ladder and a lantern still lighted lying near his bed. There were also some brushes and green and yellow paints on the floor near the ladder. "Johnsy dear," said Sue, "look out of the window. Look at that ivy leaf. Haven't you wondered why it doesn't flutter when the wind blows? That's Behrman's masterpiece. He painted it the night the last leaf fell."

O. HENRY

Glossary

janitor: a person whose job is to look after a building

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What is Johnsy's illness? What can cure her, the medicine or the willingness to live?
2. Do you think the feeling of depression Johnsy has is common among teenagers?
3. Behrman has a dream. What is it? Does it come true?
4. What is Behrman's masterpiece? What makes Sue say so?

TALK ABOUT IT

Have you ever felt depressed and rejected? How did you overcome such feelings? Share your experience with your classmates.

SUGGESTED READING

- 'The Gift of the Magi' by O.Henry
- 'Dusk' by Saki (H.H. Munro)
- *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul on Tough Stuff:* Compiled and edited by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Kimberly Kirberger

8. A House Is Not a Home

This story reflects the challenges of being a teenager, and the problems of growing up. How does the author overcome his problems?

My first year of high school felt awkward. After leaving junior high at the head of my class with all the seniority the upper grade levels could afford me, it felt strange starting over as a freshman. The school was twice as big as my old school, and to make matters worse, my closest friends were sent to a different high school. I felt very isolated.

I missed my old teachers so much that I would go back and visit them. They would encourage me to get involved in school activities so that I could meet new people. They told me that in time I would adjust and probably end up loving my new school more than I had my old one. They made me promise that when that happened I would still come by and visit them from time to time. I understood the psychology in what they were saying, but I took some comfort in it nonetheless.

One Sunday afternoon, not long after I had started high school, I was sitting at home at our dining-room table doing homework. It was a cold and windy fall day, and we had a fire going in our fireplace. As usual, my red tabby cat was lying on top of all my papers, purring loudly and occasionally swatting at my pen for entertainment's sake.

She was never far from me. I had rescued her when she was a kitten, and somehow she knew that I was the one responsible for giving her 'the good life'.

My mother kept stoking the fire to keep the house nice and warm. Suddenly, I smelled something strange, and then I noticed it... smoke pouring in through the seams of the ceiling. The smoke began to fill the room so quickly that we could barely see. Groping

our way to the front door, we all ran out into the front yard. By the time we made our way outside, the whole roof was engulfed in flames and it was spreading quickly. I ran to the neighbours to call the fire department, while I watched my mother run back into the house.

My mother then ran out of the house carrying a small metal box full of important documents. She dropped the case on the lawn and, in a crazed state, ran back into the house. I knew what she was after. My father had died when I was young, and I was certain that she was not going to let his pictures and letters go up in flames. They were the only things that she had to remember him by. Still I screamed at her, "Mom! No!"

I was about to run after her when I felt a large hand hold me back. It was a fireman. I hadn't even noticed that the street had already filled with fire trucks. I was trying to free myself from his grasp, yelling, "You don't understand, my mother's in there!"

He held on to me while other firefighters ran into the house. He knew that I wasn't acting very logically and that if he were to let go, I'd run. He was right.

"It's all right, they'll get her," he said.

He wrapped a blanket around me and sat me down in our car. Soon after that, a fireman emerged from our house with

my mom in tow. He quickly took her over to the truck and put an oxygen mask on her. I ran over and hugged her. All those times I ever argued with her and hated her vanished at the thought of losing her.

"She's going to be okay," said the fireman. "She just inhaled a little smoke." And then he ran back to fight the fire while my mother and I sat there dazed. I remember watching my house burn down and thinking that there was nothing I could do about it.

Five hours later, the fire was finally out. Our house was almost completely burned down. But then it struck me ... I hadn't seen my cat. Where was my cat? Much to my horror, I realised that she was nowhere to be found. Then all at once it hit me — the new school, the fire, my cat — I broke down in tears and cried and cried. I was suffering loss, big time.

The firemen wouldn't let us go back into the house that night. It was still too dangerous. Dead or alive, I couldn't imagine leaving without knowing about my cat. Regardless, I had to go. We piled into the car with just the clothes on our backs and a few of the firemen's blankets, and made our way to my grandparents' house to spend the night.

The next day, Monday, I went to school. When the fire broke out, I was still wearing the dress I had worn to church that morning but I had no shoes! I had kicked them off when I was doing my homework. They became yet another casualty of the fire. So I had to borrow some tennis shoes from my aunt. Why couldn't I just stay home from school? My mother wouldn't hear of it, but I was totally embarrassed by everything. The clothes I was wearing looked weird, I had no books or homework, and my backpack was gone. I had my life in that backpack! The more I tried to fit in, the worse it got. Was I destined to be an outcast and a geek all my life? That's what it felt like. I didn't want to grow up, change or have to handle life if it was going to be this way. I just wanted to curl up and die.

I walked around school like a zombie. Everything felt surreal, and I wasn't sure what was going to happen. All the security I had known, from my old school, my friends, my house and my cat had all been ripped away.

When I walked through what used to be my house after school that day, I was shocked to see how much damage there was — whatever hadn't burned was destroyed by the water and chemicals they had used to put out the fire. The only material things not destroyed were the photo albums, documents and some other personal items that my mother had managed to heroically rescue. But my cat was gone and my heart ached for her.

There was no time to grieve. My mother rushed me out of the house. We would have to find a place to live, and I would have to go buy some clothes for school.

We had to borrow money from my grandparents because there were no credit cards, cash or even any identification to be able to withdraw money from the bank. Everything had gone up in smoke.

That week the rubble that used to be our house was being cleared off the lot. Even though we had rented an apartment nearby, I would go over to watch them clear away debris, hoping that my cat was somewhere to be found. She was gone. I kept thinking about her as that vulnerable little kitten. In the early morning when I would disturb her and get out of bed, she would tag along after me, climb up my robe and crawl into my pocket to fall asleep. I was missing her terribly.

It always seems that bad news spreads quickly, and in my case it was no different. Everyone in high school, including the teachers, was aware of my plight. I was embarrassed as if somehow I were responsible. What a way to start off at a new school! This was not the kind of attention I was looking for.

The next day at school, people were acting even more strange than usual. I was getting ready for gym class at my locker. People were milling around me, asking me to hurry up. I thought it strange, but in the light of the past few weeks, nothing would surprise me. It almost seemed that they were trying to shove me into the gym — then I saw why. There was a big table set up with all kinds of stuff on it, just for me. They had taken up a collection and bought me school supplies, notebooks, all kinds of different clothes — jeans, tops, sweatsuits. It was like Christmas. I was overcome by emotion. People who had never spoken to me before were coming up to me to introduce themselves. I got all kinds of invitations to their houses. Their genuine outpouring of concern

really touched me. In that instant, I finally breathed a sigh of relief and thought for the first time that things were going to be okay. I made friends that day.

A month later, I was at my house watching them rebuild it. But this time it was different — I wasn't alone. I was with two of my new friends from school. It took a fire for me to stop focusing on my feelings of insecurity and open up to all the wonderful people around me. Now I was sitting there watching my house being rebuilt when I realised my life was doing the same thing.

While we sat there on the curb, planning my new bedroom, I heard someone walk up to me from behind and say, "Does this belong to you?" When I turned around to see who it was, I couldn't believe my eyes. A woman was standing there holding my cat! I leapt up and grabbed her out of the woman's arms. I held her

close to me and cried into that beautiful orange fur. She purred happily. My friends were hugging me, hugging the cat and jumping around.

Apparently, my cat had been so freaked by the fire that she ran over a mile away. Her collar had our phone number on it, but our phones had been destroyed and disconnected. This wonderful woman took her in and worked hard to find out whose cat it was. Somehow, she knew this cat was loved and sorely missed.

As I sat there with my friends and my cat curled up in my lap, all the overwhelming feelings of loss and tragedy seemed to diminish. I felt gratitude for my life, my new friends, the kindness of a stranger and the loud purr of my beloved cat. My cat was back and so was I.

ZAN GAUDIOSO

Glossary

stoking the fire: feeding and tending the fire
zombie: a dull and apathetic person
surreal: strange; bizarre
milling around: moving in an aimless manner
shove: push hard

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What does the author notice one Sunday afternoon? What is his mother's reaction? What does she do?
2. Why does he break down in tears after the fire?
3. Why is the author deeply embarrassed the next day in school? Which words show his fear and insecurity?
4. The cat and the author are very fond of each other. How has this been shown in the story? Where was the cat after the fire? Who brings it back and how?
5. What actions of the schoolmates change the author's understanding of life and people, and comfort him

emotionally? How does his loneliness vanish and how does he start participating in life?

6. What is the meaning of "My cat was back and so was I"? Had the author gone anywhere? Why does he say that he is also back?

Talk About It

Have any of your classmates/schoolmates had an experience like the one described in the story where they needed help? Describe how they were helped.

Suggested Reading

- *Her Story So Far: Tales of the Girl Child in India* edited by Monica Das
- *Modern Hindi Stories* edited by Indu Jain
- *Malgudi Days* by R.K. Narayan

9. The Accidental Tourist

They say that the world today is a small place because travel has become easy, but not everybody finds it easy to travel. Here, the author reflects humorously his experiences as a traveller.

Of all the things I am not very good at, living in the real world is perhaps the most outstanding. I am constantly filled with wonder at the number of things that other people do without any evident difficulty that are pretty much beyond me. I cannot tell you the number of times that I have gone looking for the lavatory in a cinema, for instance, and ended up standing in an alley on the wrong side of a selflocking door. My particular specialty now is returning to hotel desks two or three times a day and asking what my room number is. I am, in short, easily confused.

I was thinking about this the last time we went *en famille* on a big trip. It was at Easter, and we were flying to England for a week. When we arrived at Logan Airport in Boston and were checking in, I suddenly remembered that I had recently joined British Airways' frequent flyer programme. I also remembered that I had put the card in the carry-on bag that was hanging around my neck. And here's where the trouble started.

The zip on the bag was jammed. So I pulled on it and yanked at it, with grunts and frowns and increasing consternation. I kept this up for some minutes but it wouldn't budge, so I pulled harder and harder, with more grunts. Well, you can guess what happened. Abruptly the zip gave way. The side of the bag flew open and everything within — newspaper cuttings and other loose papers, a 14-ounce tin of pipe tobacco, magazines, passport, English money, film — was extravagantly ejected over

an area about the size of a tennis court.

I watched dumbstruck as a hundred carefully sorted documents came raining down in a fluttery cascade, coins bounced to a variety of noisy oblivions and the now-lidless tin of tobacco rolled crazily across the concourse disgorging its contents as it went.

"My tobacco!" I cried in horror, thinking what I would have to pay for that much tobacco in England now that another Budget had come and gone, and then changed the cry to "My finger! My finger!" as I discovered that I had gashed my finger on the zip and was shedding blood in a lavish manner. (I am not very good around flowing blood generally, but when it's my own — well, I think hysterics are fully justified.) Confused and unable to help, my hair went into panic mode.

It was at this point that my wife looked at me with an expression of wonder — not anger or exasperation, but just simple wonder — and said, "I can't believe you do this for a living."

But I'm afraid it's so. I always have catastrophes when I travel. Once on an aeroplane, I leaned over to tie a shoelace just at the moment someone in the seat ahead of me threw his seat back into full recline, and found myself pinned helplessly in the crash position. It was only by clawing the leg of the man sitting next to me that I managed to get myself freed.

On another occasion, I knocked a soft drink onto the lap of a sweet little lady sitting beside me. The flight attendant came and cleaned her up, and brought me a replacement drink, and instantly I knocked it onto the woman again. To this day, I don't know how I did it. I just remember reaching out for the new drink and watching helplessly as my arm, like some cheap prop in one of those 1950s horror movies with a name like *The Undead Limb*, violently swept the drink from its perch and onto her lap.

The lady looked at me with the stupefied expression you would expect to receive from someone whom you have repeatedly drenched, and uttered an oath that started with "Oh", finished with "sake" and in between had some words that I have never heard uttered in public before, certainly not by a nun.

This, however, was not my worst experience on a plane flight. My worst experience was when I was writing important thoughts in a notebook ('buy socks', 'clutch drinks carefully', etc.), sucking thoughtfully on the end of my pen as you do, and fell into

conversation with an attractive young lady in the next seat. I amused her for perhaps 20 minutes with a scattering of urbane *bons mots*, then retired to the lavatory where I discovered that the pen had leaked and that my mouth, chin, tongue, teeth and gums were now a striking, scrub-resistant navy blue, and would remain so for several days.

So you will understand, I trust, when I tell you how much I ache to be suave. I would love, just once in my life, to rise from a dinner table without looking as if I have just experienced an extremely localised seismic event, get in a car and close the door without leaving 14 inches of coat outside, wear light-coloured trousers without discovering at the end of the day that I have at various times sat on chewing gum, ice cream, cough syrup and motor oil. But it is not to be.

Now on planes when the food is delivered, my wife says: "Take the lids off the food for Daddy" or "Put your hoods up, children. Daddy's about to cut his meat". Of course, this is only when I am flying with my family. When I am on my own, I don't eat, drink or lean over to tie my shoelaces, and never put a pen anywhere near my mouth. I just sit very, very quietly, sometimes on my hands to keep them from flying out unexpectedly and causing liquid mischief. It's not much fun, but it does at least cut down on the laundry bills.

I never did get my frequent flyer miles, by the way. I never do. I couldn't find the card in time. This has become a real frustration for me. Everyone I know — everyone — is forever flying off to Bali first class with their air miles. I never get to collect anything. I must fly 100,000 miles a year, yet I have accumulated only about 212 air miles divided between twenty-three airlines.

This is because either I forget to ask for the air miles when I check in, or I remember to ask for them but the airline then manages not to record them, or the check-in clerk informs me that I am not entitled to them. In January, on a flight to Australia — a flight for which I was going to get about a zillion air miles — the clerk shook her head when I presented my card and told me I was not entitled to any.

"Why?"

"The ticket is in the name of B. Bryson and the card is in the name of W. Bryson."

I explained to her the close and venerable relationship between Bill and William, but she wouldn't have it.

So I didn't get my air miles, and I won't be flying to Bali first class just yet. Perhaps just as well, really. I could never go that long without eating.

BILL BRYSON

Glossary

alley: a narrow passage-way between or behind buildings

yanked: pulled with a jerk

concourse: the open central area in a large public building (here, in the airport)

disgorging: discharging

exasperation: irritation

suave: sophisticated, polite

seismic event: usually, an earthquake

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Bill Bryson says, "I am, in short, easily confused." What examples has he given to justify this?
2. What happens when the zip on his carry-on bag gives way?
3. Why is his finger bleeding? What is his wife's reaction?
4. How does Bill Bryson end up in a "crash position" in the aircraft?
5. Why are his teeth and gums navy blue?
6. Bill Bryson "ached to be suave". Is he successful in his mission? List his 'unsuave' ways.
7. Why do you think Bill Bryson's wife says to the children, "Take the lids off the food for Daddy"?
8. What is the significance of the title?

Talk About It

To get confused and behave in 'unsuave' ways like Bill Bryson is normal and human. Tell your class about any similar situation that you found yourself in.

Suggested Reading

- *Three Men in a Boat* by Jerome K. Jerome
- *Three Men on a Burnell* by Jerome K. Jerome
- *Riding the Ranges* by Bill Aitkin

10. The Beggar

What induced the beggar, Lushkoff, to change his ways? Let's read and find out.

"KIND sir, have pity; turn your attention to a poor, hungry man! For three days I have had nothing to eat; I haven't five copecks for a lodging, I swear it before God. For eight years I was a village schoolteacher and then I lost my place through intrigues. I fell a victim to calumny. It is a year now since I have had anything to do."

The advocate, Sergei, looked at the ragged, fawn-coloured overcoat of the suppliant, at his dull, drunken eyes, at the red spot on either cheek, and it seemed to him as if he had seen this man somewhere before.

"I have now had an offer of a position in the province of Kaluga," the mendicant went on, "but I haven't the money to get there. Help me kindly; I am ashamed to ask, but — I am obliged to by circumstances."

Sergei's eyes fell on the man's overshoes, one of which was high and the other low, and he suddenly remembered something.

"Look here, it seems to me I met you the day before yesterday in Sadovya Street," he said; "but you told me then that you were a student who had been expelled, and not a village schoolteacher. Do you remember?"

"N-no, that can't be so," mumbled the beggar, taken aback. "I am a village schoolteacher, and if you like I can show you my papers."

"Have done with lying! You called yourself a student and even told me what you had been expelled for. Don't you remember?"

Sergei flushed and turned from the ragged creature with an expression of disgust.

"This is dishonesty, my dear sir!" he cried angrily. "This is swindling — I shall send the police for you, damn you!"

"Sir!" he said, laying his hand on his heart, "the fact is I was lying! I am neither a student nor a schoolteacher. All that was fiction. Formerly I sang in a Russian choir and was sent away for drunkenness. But what else can I do? I can't get along without lying. No one will give me anything when I tell the truth, what can I do?"

"What can you do? You ask what you can do?" cried Sergei, coming close to him. "Work! That's what you can do! You must work!"

"Work — yes. I know that myself; but where can I find work?"

"How would you like to chop wood for me?"

"I wouldn't refuse to do that, but in these days even skilled wood-cutters find themselves sitting without bread."

"Will you come and chop wood for me?"

"Yes sir, I will."

"Very well; we'll soon find out."

Sergei hastened along, rubbing his hands. He called his cook out of the kitchen.

"Here, Olga," he said, "take this gentleman into the wood-shed and let him chop wood."

The scarecrow of a beggar shrugged his shoulders, as if in perplexity, and went irresolutely after the cook. It was obvious from his gait that he had not consented to go and chop wood because he was hungry and wanted work, but simply from pride and shame and because he had been trapped by his own words. It was obvious, too, that his strength had been undermined by vodka and that he was unhealthy and did not feel the slightest inclination for toil.

Sergei hurried into the dining-room. From its windows one could see the wood-shed and everything that went on in the yard. Standing at the window, Sergei saw the cook and the beggar come out into the yard by the back door and make their way across the dirty snow to the shed. Olga glared wrathfully at her companion, shoved him aside with her elbow, unlocked the shed, and angrily banged the door.

Next he saw the pseudo-teacher seat himself on a log and become lost in thought with his red cheeks resting on his fists. The woman flung down an axe at his feet, spat angrily, and, judging from the expression of her lips, began to scold him. The beggar irresolutely pulled a billet of wood towards him, set it up between his feet, and tapped it feebly with the axe. The billet wavered and fell down. The beggar again pulled it to him, blew on his freezing hands, and tapped it with his axe cautiously, as if afraid of hitting his overshoe or of cutting off his finger; the stick of wood again fell to the ground.

Sergei's anger had vanished and he now began to feel a little sorry and ashamed of himself for having set a spoiled, drunken, perhaps sick man to work at menial labour in the cold.

An hour later Olga came in and announced that the wood had all been chopped.

"Good! Give him half a rouble," said Sergei. "If he wants to he can come back and cut wood on the first day of each month. We can always find work for him."

On the first of the month the waif made his appearance and again earned half a rouble, although he could barely stand on his legs. From that day on he often appeared in the yard and every

time work was found for him. Now he would shovel snow, now put the wood-shed in order, now beat the dust out of rugs and mattresses. Every time he received from twenty to forty copecks, and once, even a pair of old trousers were sent out to him.

When Sergei moved into another house he hired him to help in the packing and hauling of the furniture. This time the waif was sober, gloomy, and silent. He hardly touched the furniture, and walked behind the wagons hanging his head, not even making a pretence of appearing busy. He only shivered in the cold and became embarrassed when the carters jeered at him for his idleness, his feebleness, and his tattered, fancy overcoat. After the moving was over Sergei sent for him.

"Well, I am happy that my words have taken effect,'" he said, handing him a rouble. "Here's for your pains. I see you are sober and have no objection to work. What is your name?'"

"Lushkoff."

"Well, Lushkoff, I can now offer you some other, cleaner employment. Can you write?'"

"I can."

"Then take this letter to a friend of mine tomorrow and you will be given some copying to do. Work hard, don't drink, and remember what I have said to you. Goodbye!"

Pleased at having put a man on the right path, Sergei tapped Lushkoff kindly on the shoulder and even gave him his hand at parting. Lushkoff took the letter, and from that day forth came no more to the yard for work.

Two years went by. Then one evening, as Sergei was standing at the ticket window of a theatre paying for his seat, he noticed a little man beside him with a coat collar of curly fur and a worn sealskin cap. This little individual timidly asked the ticket seller for a seat in the gallery and paid for it in copper coins.

"Lushkoff, is that you?" cried Sergei, recognising in the little man his former wood-chopper. "How are you? What are you doing? How is everything with you?"

"All right. I am a notary now and am paid thirty-five roubles a month."

"Thank Heaven! That's fine! I am delighted for your sake. I am very, very glad, Lushkoff. You see, you are my godson, in a sense. I gave you a push along the right path, you know. Do you remember what a roasting I gave you, eh? I nearly had you sinking into the ground at my feet that day. Thank you, old man, for not forgetting my words."

"Thank you, too." said Lushkoff. "If I hadn't come to you then I might still have been calling myself a teacher or a student to this day. Yes, by flying to your protection I dragged myself out of a pit."

"I am very glad, indeed."

"Thank you for your kind words and deeds. I am very grateful to you and to your cook. God bless that good and noble woman! You spoke finely then, and I shall be indebted to you to my dying day; but, strictly speaking, it was your cook, Olga, who saved me."

"How is that?"

"When I used to come to your house to chop wood she used to begin: 'Oh, you sot, you! Oh, you miserable creature! There's nothing for you but ruin.' And then she would sit down opposite me and grow sad, look into my face and weep. 'Oh, you unlucky man! There is no pleasure for you in this world and there will be none in the world to come. You drunkard! You will burn in hell. Oh, you unhappy one!' And so she would carry on, you know, in that strain. I can't tell you how much misery she suffered, how many tears she shed for my sake. But the chief thing was — she

used to chop the wood for me. Do you know, sir, that I did not chop one single stick of wood for you? She did it all. Why this saved me, why I changed, why I stopped drinking at the sight of her I cannot explain. I only know that, owing to her words and noble deeds, a change took place in my heart; she set me right and I shall never forget it. However, it is time to go now; there goes the bell." Lushkoff bowed and departed to the gallery.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Glossary

copeck (also spelt **kopeck**)**:** Russian coin equal to one hundredth of a rouble

calumny: the making of false and defamatory statements about someone in order to damage his/her reputation

suppliant (or **supplicant**)**:** a person making a humble plea to someone in power or authority

mendicant: beggar

swindling: cheating a person of money

perplexity: state of being puzzled; bewilderment

irresolutely: hesitantly; undecidedly

billet: here, a thick piece of wood

waif: a homeless person

shovel: remove snow with a shovel (a tool resembling a spade with a broad blade and typically upturned sides)

roasting (an informal or humorous word)**:** here, scolding

sot: a habitual drunkard

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Has Lushkoff become a beggar by circumstance or by choice?
2. What reasons does he give to Sergei for his telling lies?
3. Is Lushkoff a willing worker? Why, then, does he agree to chop wood for Sergei?

4. Sergei says, "I am happy that my words have taken effect." Why does he say so? Is he right in saying this?
5. Lushkoff is earning thirty five roubles a month. How is he obliged to Sergei for this?
6. During their conversation Lushkoff reveals that Sergei's cook, Olga, is responsible for the positive change in him. How has Olga saved Lushkoff?

Talk About It

How can we help beggars/abolish begging?

Suggested Reading

- 'The Man with the Twisted Lip' by Arthur Conan Doyle
- *The Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov