

Hold Fast Your Dreams

Within your heart
Keep one still, secret spot
Where dreams may go,
And sheltered so,
May thrive and grow-
Where doubt and fear are not.
Oh, keep a place apart
Within your heart,
For little dreams to go.

– Louis Driscoll

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A Story and a Song

A. K. Ramanujan

Pre-reading Activity

1. Do you like to listen to stories or tell them? Who do you think has the more active role – the speaker or the listener? Discuss among yourselves.
2. Which qualities are traditionally associated with women– those of speech and authority or those of silence and passivity? Discuss with your partner.
3. What do you expect to read about in the story ‘A Story and a Song’?

A housewife knew a story. She also knew a song. But she kept them to herself, never told anyone the story or the song or sang the song.

Imprisoned within her, the story and the song were feeling choked. They wanted release, wanted to run away. One day, when she was sleeping with her mouth open, the story escaped, fell out of her, took the shape of a pair of shoes and sat outside the house. The song also escaped, took the shape of something like a man’s coat, and hung up on a peg.

The woman’s husband came home, looked at the coat and shoes, and asked her, “Who is visiting?”

“No one”, she said.

“But whose coat and shoes are these?”

“I don’t know”, she replied.

He wasn't satisfied with her answer. He was suspicious. Their conversation was unpleasant. The unpleasantness led to a quarrel. The husband flew into a rage, picked up his blanket, and went to the Monkey God's temple to sleep.

The woman didn't understand what was happening. She lay down alone that night. She asked the same question over and over: "Whose coat and shoes are these?" Baffled and unhappy, she put out the lamp and went to sleep.

All the lamp flames of the town, once they were put out, used to come to the Monkey God's temple and spend the night there, gossiping. On this night, all the lamps of all the houses were represented there—all except one, which came late.

The others asked the latecomer, "Why are you so late tonight?" "At our house, the couple quarrelled late into the night", said the flame.

"Why did they quarrel?"

"When the husband wasn't home, a pair of shoes came onto the verandah, and a man's coat somehow got onto a peg. The husband asked her whose they were. The wife said she didn't know. So they quarrelled."

"Where did the coat and the shoes come from?"

"The lady of our house knows a story and a song. She never tells the story, and has never sung the song to anyone. The story and the song got suffocated inside; so they got out and have turned into a coat and a pair of shoes. They took revenge. The woman doesn't even know."

The husband, lying under his blanket in the temple, heard the lamp's explanation. His suspicions were cleared. When he went home, it was dawn. He asked his wife about her story and her song. But she had forgotten both of them. "What story, what song?" she said.

Glossary

baffled not able to understand what was happening

Reading Comprehension

- Given below are a few facts/events from the story. How do you find them—strange or normal?
 - the story is turned into a pair of shoes
 - the song is turned into a man's coat
 - the coat and the shoes sit outside the house
 - the man becomes suspicious
 - the man quarrels with the woman
 - the lamp flames when put out come to the temple and gossip
 - the story and the song in the woman's heart remain unexpressed
- In the Indian worldview, nothing is ever lost, only transformed. The flames of lamps don't get extinguished at night: when they are put out, they simply move from home to temple, and return to the wicks when the lamps are lit again next evening. Lamps and flames are symbols of life, wealth and family happiness. Now try to work out what the song and the story signify here.
- Compare the beginning and the end of the story. What happens to the story and the song the housewife knew?
- Do you find the story funny or sad? Discuss among yourselves.
- There are no names given to the housewife and the husband? Do you think this is significant?
- Do you think the song and the story are expressions of creativity or/and assertion of one's being? Does forgetting one's song and story mean only a temporary loss or suppression of one's own self and identity? Discuss among yourselves.

Vocabulary

- The following expressions that occur in the story show contrast in meanings:
imprisoned, release, choked, run away, escaped, suffocated
Put these in the right column in the table given below: