

The Beginning of the Stories

Summer holidays! Ajji smiled to herself as she waited for two more of her grandchildren to arrive. Raghu and Meenu would be here soon. Anand and Krishna had already arrived with their mother the previous evening. They had been waiting restlessly for their cousins to arrive ever since. Even though Ajji told them Raghu and Meenu would be here the next morning, these two kids just would not listen. They went to the railway station with their grandfather, Ajja, to receive them. The train must have pulled into the tiny railway station of Shiggaon by now, and their grandfather would have hired a taxi to bring them home along with their mother and the stacks of luggage.

Ajji hurried through her bath. She had finished cooking their favourite dishes, and was now wearing a nice, soft cotton sari before going to the veranda to wait for them.

There! There they came! What a noise the children were making! They all nearly tumbled out of the car and came leaping and shouting to her, each wanting to be the first to be hugged by her. Each one wanted to be closest to Ajji.

Soon the children settled down. A visit to Ajji and Ajja's house meant first inspecting the garden to see how much the plants had grown since they last came. Then they went to check on the cows, calves, dog, pups, cats and kittens. Then they all ate huge quantities of Ajji's delicious food. Finally, while their mothers went off to chat and rest, the children gathered around their grandmother for the best part of the holidays—listening to her wonderful stories, particularly in the late afternoon.

Let us, too, gather under the fast revolving fan, on a mat on the floor, fighting to be nearest to her, and listen in.





'Doctor, Doctor'

The first day, the children asked, 'Ajji, how do you know so many stories?'

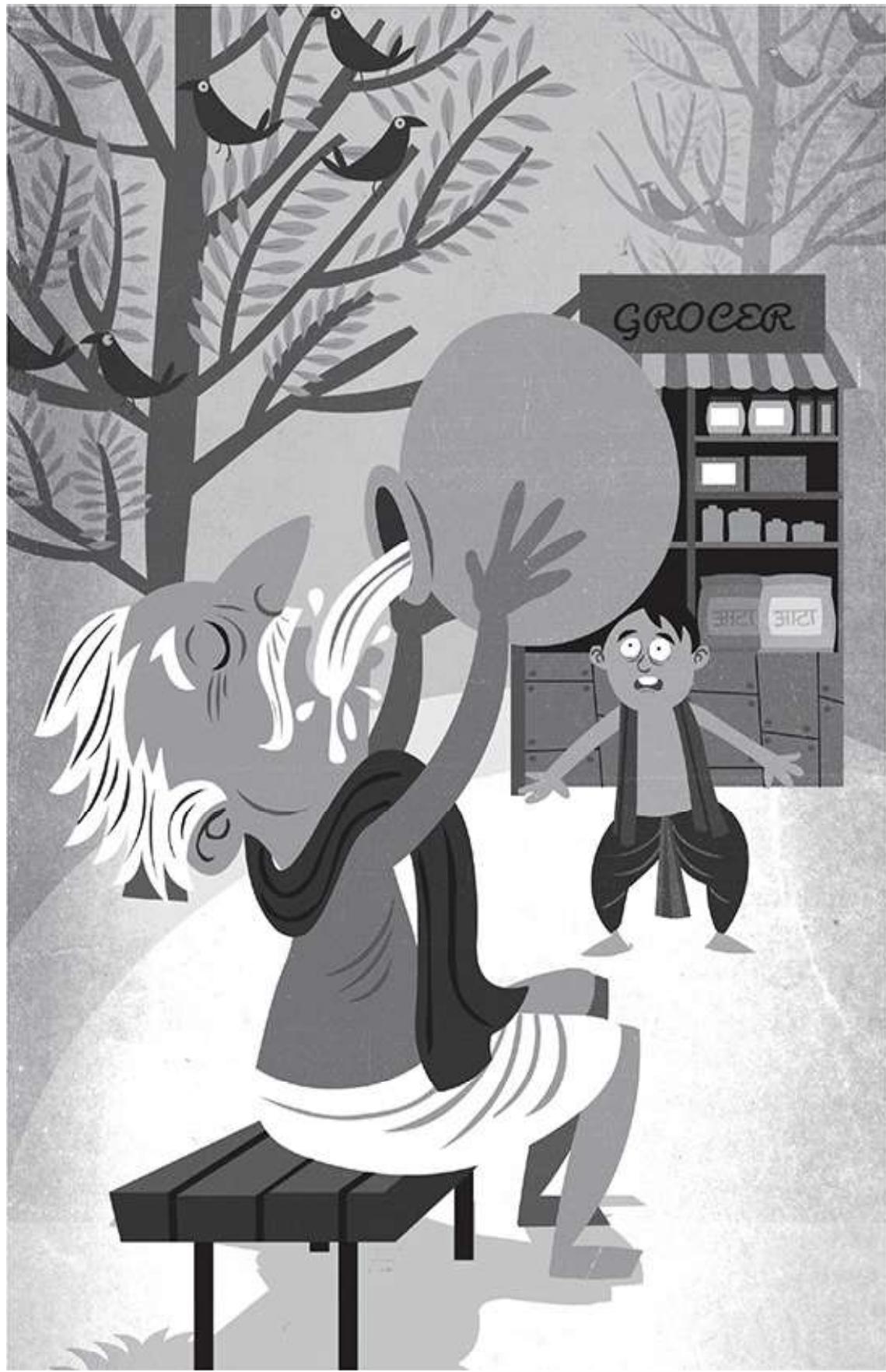
Ajji smiled and answered, 'My grandmother told me many stories. Some I read in books. A few I learnt from youngsters like you, and the rest from your Ajja.' Then Ajji paused and said, 'I see all of you have grown a lot since the last time I saw you. So before I start telling any stories, I want to know what each of you want to be when you grow up.'

Raghu, who was eleven years old, and the oldest of all, said immediately, 'I want to be an environment scientist.' Meenu, who was nine, said, 'I have not decided, maybe a computer person like my dad.' Anand, who was ten, said, 'I want to be an astronaut,' and his twin sister Krishna firmly said, 'I want to become a fashion designer.' Ajji smiled. 'I am glad all of you have thought about this. We should always have some aim in life which we must try to achieve while being of help to others. Now let me tell you a story of a person who learnt just such a lesson.'

Shall we, too, join Ajji and her gang of young friends and hear the story?

On a blazing hot summer afternoon, an old man came walking down a narrow village path. He was tired and thirsty. Right by the road, he spotted a tiny grocery store. It had a tin roof and mud walls. The shopkeeper sat inside fanning himself and shooing away the flies that were buzzing around in the stifling heat. There was a little bench in front of the store where the villagers met when evening came and the land had cooled down. The old man flopped

down on the bench. He was so tired that for a while he could not speak. Finally, he opened his mouth and uttered one word, ‘Water!’



Now, this village had been facing a horrible problem for a long time. It was near a great desert and the rains came only once a year to fill its ponds and wells. But the rains had disappeared for the last two years, and the villagers had been making do with water from a faraway stream. Every morning groups of men and women walked a long distance, filled their pots from the little stream and used that the whole day. Naturally, no one wanted to waste even a drop of this precious water.

Yet how do you say no to a thirsty, tired old man when he asks for water? Without a second thought, the shopkeeper, Ravi, who was very kindhearted, poured out a tumbler of water from his pot and gave it to the old man. The man drank it up greedily. Then he said one more word: ‘More!’ And without waiting for Ravi to give it to him, he lunged for the pot, picked it up and lifting it to his lips drank up Ravi’s entire day’s supply of water!

Poor Ravi, what could he do? He just stared in dismay. Then he told himself, ‘Never mind. After all, I did help someone in need.’

The stranger, meanwhile, now seemed to feel better. He handed the pot back to Ravi, gave a smile that filled Ravi’s heart with warmth and said, ‘My son, always be kind like this. Help everyone who comes to you like you helped me, and you will be blessed.’ Then he picked up his stick and slowly hobbled down the road. Ravi watched the strange old man disappear into the distance, then returned to his shop.

The afternoon heat grew worse. After a while Ravi felt his head was about to burst with a headache. His lips were parched and his throat hurt, it was so dry. He really needed a drink of water. But the visitor had finished it all up! Hoping to coax a drop or two out of the pot, Ravi lifted it to his lips and tilted it. Imagine his surprise when a gush of water ran down his face! It was sweet, refreshing water which not only quenched his thirst, but wiped out his headache too.

Ravi was staring at the water pot, trying to figure out what had just happened, when Karim limped into his shop. Karim was a young man who had hurt his leg in an accident many years ago which had left him with a limp. When he was unwell or tired, his limp became worse. Karim, too, flopped down on the bench in front of the store and caught his breath, like the old man. Then he fished out a shopping list from his pocket and handed it to Ravi. As Ravi started packing up the items listed on the paper, Karim opened a little bundle of food and ate his lunch sitting on the bench. Finally he wiped his

mouth on his scarf and pointed to Ravi's pot of water. 'Mind if I take a little sip? It is so hot after all.'

Ravi was busy measuring out some dal. He said without looking up, 'I would be happy to offer you some, but someone's already had most of it. Then I was feeling unwell and I think I finished the last of it.'

'What are you saying, my friend? I can clearly see the pot brimming over with water!'

Ravi looked up and stared in disbelief. In front of his eyes, Karim poured out a tumblerful of water and drank it. Then he paid for all his groceries and left the store.

Did his limp look as if it was nearly gone? Ravi watched him for a while trying to figure out, then decided the heat was playing tricks on his mind and went back into the cool comfort of his shop and dozed off.

He woke with a start as someone was calling his name urgently. He opened his eyes to find Karim back. This time he was holding by the hand his little sister Fatima. 'Brother, wake up. We need your help,' Karim urged.

'Wh-what? Is something wrong?'

'Fatima is burning up with fever!'

'Then go to a doctor, why have you got her to a grocery shop?'

Karim stared at him and said, 'You mean you don't know how you just helped me? My leg, which has been troubling me for the last many years, healed up on its own as soon as I drank the water from your magic pitcher! Give Fatima a drink from it, too. I am sure her fever will disappear in no time.'

Ravi was astounded. Magic pitcher? Healing water? What was Karim going on about? Nonetheless he passed the pot to Fatima. She drank a bit, then sat down to rest. Within minutes she lifted her head and said, 'It is true, brothers! I am indeed cured of the fever!'

Soon the news spread in the village like wildfire. Ravi, the quiet, kind grocery storekeeper, was now the owner of a magic pitcher, the waters from which could heal anyone of any disease. Every night Ravi left the pitcher in the store, and in the morning it would be filled to the brim with sweet, cool water. Daily, a queue of sick people and their relatives collected in front of his shop. To each one Ravi gave a drink of the water, and they went away saying they were now better. The pot was never empty. Ravi realized the old man he had helped must have given him this gift in gratitude. Ravi understood what a great gift it was and thanked him daily in his mind.

Soon his little store turned into a hospital. Ravi did not charge a paisa for the water. People would leave some money, some gifts for him, and others did not pay him anything but he was still happy with that.

One day, a rich landlord's servant appeared at his doorstep and said, 'My master is unwell. Come with me and give him a drink of your water.'

Ravi replied, 'See the crowd of people behind you, waiting for their turn. How can I leave without helping them and go to your master? Do you think these sick people can stand in the sun for long? Tell your master to come to me instead and I will give him the water here.'

The servant said, 'Ravi, what will you get by helping these poor people? A few rupees? Some rice and dal? Come to my master's house. He will shower you with money and gifts. Your worries about making ends meet will be over for at least a month.'

Ravi was tempted. It was true, why not cure one rich man and get some help in buying his daily needs? Ravi told the people waiting outside to come back the next day and went with the servant to the landlord.

Slowly, in this way, Ravi changed. Where once he could not bear to see the pain and sadness of the sick and poor people, he now started each day hoping he would get one rich patient at least, who would pay him handsomely.

Days passed thus. Seasons changed and it was summer once more. Ravi was in his old store, writing up his accounts, when the voice of an old man quavered in his ear, 'Son, water!'

Startled, he looked up. Was it the same old man who had given him the gift of the magic pitcher? But right behind the visitor was none other than the king's messenger. 'Come quickly!' the messenger shouted. 'The queen has been bitten by a mosquito!'

'Water!' the old man repeated.

'The queen is unwell!' the messenger shouted again.

Ravi looked from one to the other. One was a grubby old man who may or may not be the same person who gave him the pitcher. On the other side a messenger from the king himself! He pictured the gold coins showering down on him once his healing water soothed the queen's mosquito bites. The choice was clear.

He picked up his pitcher and said to the stranger, 'Wait right here, Uncle, I'll be back soon.'

The king's swift-footed horses took him to the palace. There he rushed to the queen who was staring in dismay at the mosquito bites on her arm. He

tilted the pitcher to pour some water into a tumbler, but nothing came! Again and again he tilted the pitcher. He turned it upside down and stared into its depths. It was dry as a bone.

‘You cheat!’ the king roared. ‘So this is how you have been fooling the people of my kingdom! Get out, and never let me hear that you have acquired magical healing powers. If you claim such a thing again I will banish you forever from the village.’ Then he turned to comfort his queen who was splashing tears on the bump on her arm.

Ravi slowly walked back to his village. He went to his shop. No one was there. He searched for the old man who had asked for water. He was nowhere to be seen. He called out, ‘Uncle, I am sorry. I made a mistake. Please do come. I will give you water.’ But there was no reply. Now he realized this was the same old man whom he met a year back.

He remembered the people he had healed once out of kindness and compassion and how much they had blessed and loved him in return. He remembered their little acts of generosity, sparing him a few coins, a bundle of vegetables from their garden in return for the water. When did he become so selfish and greedy that he would neglect the people who had needed him the most? The old man had taken back his powers when he sensed Ravi had misused the gift.

Never mind, Ravi smiled to himself. He would use the money he had received for the water to help bring a real doctor to the village, someone who would help the people with his knowledge of medicines and diseases, so that they need not wait for a magician to cure them of their illnesses.

From that day onwards Ravi filled his pitcher with ordinary water from the stream and carried it back carefully to his little store and waited for the old man. Maybe one day he would be back, but till then, Ravi was determined to bring a real medicine man to his village.

Ajji finished her story and looked around at the four little faces around her. Raghu was deep in thought. Ajji smiled at him. Then the children shouted, ‘Ajji, tell one more story!’

‘Ah ha,’ Ajji said, ‘too many stories a day are not good either. One laddoo is very sweet, very delicious but if you eat laddoos all the time it’s no fun. Go

and play outside. Tomorrow I will tell you another story.' With that she got up and went to the kitchen to supervise the dinner.