

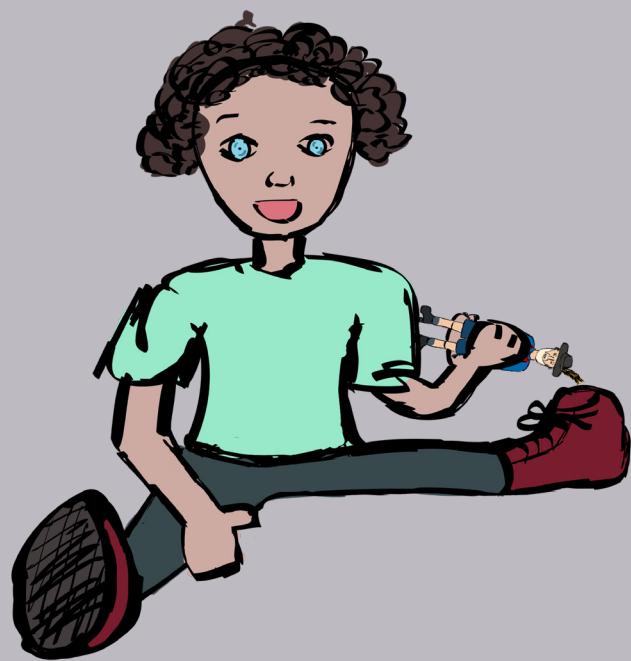


FRITZ



Narrated by Satyajit Ray
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Fritz

by Satyajit Ray

After having stared at Jayanto for a whole minute, I

could not help asking him, 'Are you well? You seem to be in low spirits today.'

Jayanto quickly lost his slightly preoccupied air, gave me a boyish smile and said, 'No. On the contrary, I am feeling a lot better. This place is truly wonderful.'

'You've been here before. Didn't you know how good it was?'

'I had nearly forgotten,' Jayanto sighed. 'Now some of my memories are coming back slowly. The bungalow certainly appears unchanged. I can even recognize some of the old furniture, such as these cane chairs and tables.'

The bearer came in with tea and biscuits on a tray. I poured.

'When did you come here last?'

'Thirty-one years ago. I was six then.' We were sitting in the garden of the circuit house in Bundi. We had arrived only that morning. Jayanto and I were old friends. We had gone to the same school and college. He now worked in the editorial division of a newspaper and I taught in a school. Although we had different kinds of jobs, it had not made any difference to our friendship.

We had been planning a trip to Rajasthan for quite some time.

The main difficulty lay in both of us being able to get away together.

That had, at last, been made possible. Most people go to Jaipur, Udaipur or Chittor when they go to Rajasthan; but Jayanto kept talking about

going to Bundi. I had no objection for, having read Tagore's poem 'The Fort of Bundi', I was certainly familiar with the name of the place and felt a pleasurable excitement at the prospect of actually seeing the fort. Not many people came to Bundi. But that did not mean that there was not much to see there.

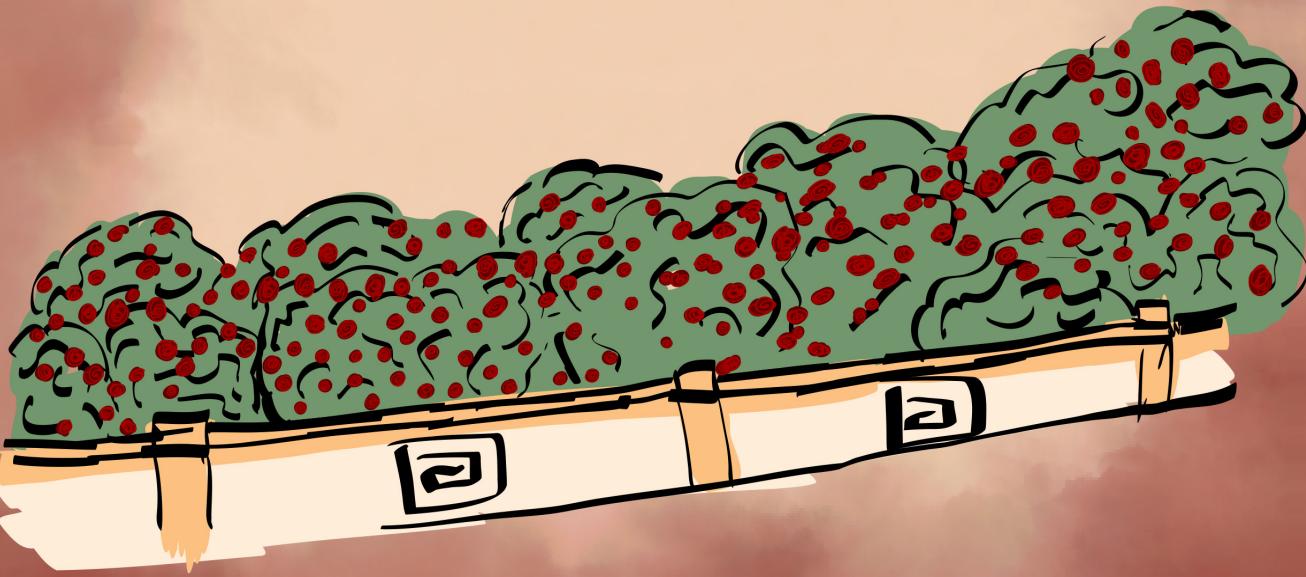
It could be that, from the point of view of a historian, Udaipur, Jodhpur and Chittor had a lot more to offer; but simply as a beautiful place, Bundi was perfect.

However, Jayanto's insistence on Bundi did puzzle me somewhat. I

learnt the reason on the train when we were coming down. Jayanto's father, Animesh Das Gupta, had worked in the Archaeological Department. His work sometimes took him to historical places, and Jayanto had as a child come to Bundi.

He had always wanted to return after growing up, just to see how much the modern Bundi compared to the image he had in his mind.





The circuit house was really rather splendid. Built during the time of the British, it must have been at least a hundred years old. It was a single-storeyed building with a sloping tiled roof. The rooms had high ceilings and the skylights had long, dangling ropes which could be pulled to open and shut them. The veranda faced the east. Right opposite it was a huge garden with a large number of roses in full bloom.

Behind these were a lot of trees which obviously housed a vast section of local birds. Parrots could be seen everywhere; and peacocks could be heard, but only outside the compound. We had already been on a sightseeing tour of the town. The famous fort of Bundi was placed amidst the hills. We had seen it from a distance that day but decided to go back to take a closer look. The only reminders of modern times were the electric poles. Otherwise it seemed as though we were

back in old Rajputana. The streets were cobbled, the houses had balconies jutting out from the first floor. The carvings done on these and the wooden doors bore evidence of the work of master craftsmen. It was difficult to believe we were living in the age of machines.

I noticed Jayanto had turned rather quiet after arriving in Bundi. Perhaps some of his memories had returned. It is easy enough to feel a little depressed when visiting a place one may have seen as a child. Besides, Jayanto was certainly more emotional than most people. Everyone knew that.



He put his cup down on the table and said, 'You know, Shankar, it is really quite strange. The first time I came here I used to sit cross-legged on these chairs. It seemed as though I was sitting on a throne. Now the chairs seem both small in size and very ordinary. The drawing-room here used to seem absolutely enormous. If I hadn't returned, those memories would have remained stuck in my mind for ever.' I said, 'Yes, that's perfectly natural. As a child, one is small in size, so everything else seems large. One grows bigger with age, but the size of all the other things remains the same, doesn't it?' We went for a stroll in the garden after tea. Jayanto suddenly stopped walking and said, 'Deodar.'



I stared at him.

'A deodar tree. It ought to be here somewhere,' he said and began striding towards the far end of the compound.

Why did he suddenly think of a deodar tree?

A few seconds later I heard his voice exclaiming jubilantly,

'Yes, it's here! Exactly where it was before!'

'Of course it's where it was before,' I said.

'Would a tree go roaming about?'

Jayanto shook his head impatiently.

'No, that is not what I meant. All I meant was that the tree is where I thought it might be.'

'But why did you suddenly think of a tree?'

Jayanto stared at the trunk of the tree, frowning. Then he shook his head slowly and said, 'I can't remember that now. Something had brought me near the tree. I had done something here. A European . . .'

'European?'

'No, I can't recall anything at all. Memory is a strange business . . .'

They had a good cook in the circuit house. Later in the evening, while we sat at the oval dining table having dinner, Jayanto said, 'The cook they had in those days was called Dilawar. He had a scar on his left cheek and his eyes were always red. But he was an excellent cook.'

Jayanto's memories began returning one by one soon after dinner when we went back to the drawing-room.

He could recall where his father used to sit and smoke a cheroot, where his mother used to knit, and what magazines lay on the table.

And, slowly, in bits and pieces, he recalled the whole business about his doll. It was not the usual kind of doll little girls play with. One of Jayanto's uncles had brought for him from Switzerland a twelve-inch-long figure of an old man, dressed in traditional Swiss style.

Apparently, it was very lifelike. Although it was not mechanized it was possible to bend and twist its limbs. Its face had a smile on it and, on its head, it wore a Swiss cap with a little yellow feather sticking out from it. Its clothes, especially in their little details, were perfect—belt, buttons, pockets, collars, socks. There were even little buckles on the shoes.

His uncle had returned from Europe shortly before Jayanto left for Bundi with his parents.

The little old man had been bought in a village in Switzerland.

The man who sold him had jokingly said to Jayanto's uncle, 'He's called Fritz. You must call him by this name. He won't respond to any other.'



Jayanto said, 'I had a lot of toys when I was small. My parents gave me practically everything I wanted, perhaps because I was their only child. But once I had Fritz, I forgot all my other toys. I played only with him. A time came when I began to spend hours just talking to him. Our conversation had to be one-sided, of course, but Fritz had such a funny smile on his lips and such a look in his eyes, that it seemed to me as though he could understand every word. Sometimes I wondered if he would actually converse with me if I could speak to him in German. Now it seems like a childish fantasy, but at that time the whole thing was very real to me. My parents did warn me not to overdo things, but I listened to no one. I had not yet been put in a school, so I had all the time in the world for Fritz.'

Jayanto fell silent. I looked at my watch and realized it was 9.30 p.m. It was very quiet outside. We were sitting in the drawing-room of the circuit house. An oil lamp burnt in the room. I asked, 'What happened to the doll?'

Jayanto was still deep in thought. His answer to my question came so late that, by that time, I had started to think that he had not heard me at all.

'I had brought it to Bundi. It was destroyed here.'

'Destroyed? How?' Jayanto sighed.

'We were sitting out on the lawn having tea. I had kept the doll by my side on the grass. I was not really old enough to have tea, but I insisted and, in the process, the cup tilted and some of the hot tea fell on my pants. I ran inside to change and came back to find that Fritz had disappeared. I looked around and found quite soon that a couple of stray dogs were having a nice tug-of-war with



Fritz. Although he didn't actually come apart, his face was battered beyond recognition and his clothes were torn. In other words, Fritz did not exist for me any more. He was dead.'

'And then?' Jayanto's story intrigued me.

'What could possibly happen after that? I arranged his funeral, that's all.' 'Meaning?'

'I buried him under that deodar tree. I had wanted to make a coffin. Fritz was, after all, a European. But I could find nothing, not even a little box. So, in the end, I buried him just like that.'

At last, the mystery of the deodar tree was solved.

We went to bed at around ten. Our room was a large one and our beds had been neatly made. Not being used to doing a lot of walking, I was feeling

rather tired after the day's activities. Besides, the bed was very comfortable. I fell asleep barely ten minutes after hitting the pillow.

A slight noise woke me a little later. I turned on my side and found Jayanto sitting up on his bed. The table lamp by his bed was switched on and, in its light, it was easy to see the look of anxiety on his face.

I asked, 'What is it? Are you not feeling well?'

Instead of answering my question, Jayanto asked me one himself.

'Do you think this circuit house has got small animals? I mean, things like cats or mice?'

'I shouldn't be surprised if it does. Why?'



'Something walked over my chest. That's what woke me.'

'Rats and mice usually come in through drains. But I've never known them to climb on the bed.'

'This is the second time I've woken up, actually. The first time I had heard a shuffling noise near the window.'

'Oh, if it was near the window, it is more likely to be a cat.'

'Yes, but . . .'

Jayanto still sounded doubtful. I said, 'Didn't you see anything after you switched the light on?'

'Nothing. But then, I didn't switch it on immediately after opening my eyes. To tell you the truth, I felt rather scared at first. But when I did switch it on, there was nothing to be seen.'

'That means whatever came in must still be in the room.' 'Well . . . since both the doors are bolted from inside . . .' I rose quickly and searched under the bed, behind our suitcases and everywhere else in the room. I could not find anything. The door to the bathroom was closed. I opened it and was about to start another search when Jayanto called out to me softly, 'Shankar!'

I came back to the room. Jayanto was staring hard at the cover of his quilt. Upon seeing me, he pulled a portion of it near the lamp and said, 'Look at this!'

I bent over the cloth and saw tiny, brown circular marks on it. I said, 'Well, these could have been made by a cat.'

Jayanto did not say anything. It was obvious that something had deeply disturbed him. But it was two-thirty in the morning. I simply had to get a little more sleep, or I knew I would just keep feeling tired. And we had plans of doing a lot of sightseeing the following day.

So, after murmuring a few soothing words—such as, don't worry, I am here with you and who knows, those marks may have been on your quilt already when you went to bed—I switched off the light once more and lay down. I had no doubt that Jayanto had only had a bad dream. All those memories of his childhood had upset him, obviously, and that was what had led to his dreaming of a cat walking on his chest.

I slept soundly for the rest of the night. If there were further disturbances, Jayanto did not tell me about them. But I could see in the morning that he had not slept well.

'Tonight I must give him one of the tranquillizers I brought with me,' I thought. We finished our breakfast by nine, as we had planned, and left for the fort. A car had already been arranged. It was almost nine-thirty by the time we reached.

Some of Jayanto's old forgotten memories began coming back again, though—fortunately—they had nothing to do with his doll. In fact, his youthful exuberance made me think he had forgotten all about it.



'There—there's that elephant on top of the gate!' he exclaimed. 'And the turrets! And here is the bed made of silver and the throne. Look at that picture on the wall—I saw it the last time!' But within an hour, his enthusiasm began to wane. I was so engrossed myself that I did not notice it at first. But, while walking through a hall and looking at the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, I suddenly realized Jayanto was no longer walking by my side. Where was he? We had a guide with us. 'Babu has gone out on the terrace,' he told me.

I came out of the hall and found Jayanto standing absent-mindedly near a wall on the other side of the terrace. He did not seem to notice my presence even when I went and stood beside him. He started when I called him by his name.

'What on earth is the matter with you?' I asked. 'Why are you standing here looking morose even in a beautiful place like this? I can't stand it.'

Jayanto simply said, 'Have you finished seeing everything? If so, let's . . .'

Had I been alone, I would definitely have spent a little more time at the fort. But one look at Jayanto made me decide in favour of returning to the circuit house.

A road through the hills took us back to town. Jayanto and I were both sitting in the back of the car. I offered him a cigarette, but he refused. I noticed a veiled excitement in the movement of his hands. One moment he placed them near the window, then on his lap and, immediately afterwards, began biting his nails. Jayanto was quiet by nature. This odd restlessness in him worried me.

After about ten minutes, I could not take it any more. 'It might help if you told me about your problem,' I said. Jayanto shook his head.

'It's no use telling you, for you're not going to believe me.'

'OK, even if I don't believe you, I can at least discuss the matter with you, can't I?'

'Fritz came into our room last night. Those little marks on my quilt were his footprints.'

There was very little I could do at this except catch hold of him by the shoulders and shake him. How could I talk sensibly to someone whose mind was obsessed with such an absurd idea?

'You didn't see anything, did you?' I said finally.

'No. But I could distinctly feel that whatever was walking on my chest had two feet, not four.'

As we got out of the car at the circuit house, I decided that Jayanto must be given a nerve tonic or some such thing. A tranquillizer might not be good enough. I could not allow a thirty-seven-year-old man to be so upset by a simple memory from his childhood.

I said to Jayanto upon reaching our room, 'It's nearly twelve o'clock. Should we not be thinking of having a bath?'

'You go first,' said Jayanto and flung himself on the bed. An idea came to my mind in the bath. Perhaps this was the only way to bring Jayanto back to normalcy.

If a doll had been buried somewhere thirty years ago and if one knew the exact spot, it might be possible to dig the ground there. No doubt most of it would have been destroyed, but it was likely that we'd find just a few things, especially if they were made of metal, such as the buckle of a belt or brass buttons on a jacket. If Jayanto could actually be shown that that was all that was left of his precious doll, he might be able to rid himself of his weird notions; otherwise, he would have strange dreams every night and talk of Fritz walking on his chest. If this kind of thing was allowed to continue he might go totally mad.

Jayanto seemed to like my idea at first. But, after a little while, he said, 'Who will do the digging? Where will you find a spade?'

I laughed, 'Since there is a garden, there is bound to be a gardener. And that would mean there's a spade. If we offered him a little tip, I have no doubt that he would have no objection to digging up a bit of the ground near the trunk of a tree at the far end of the lawn.'

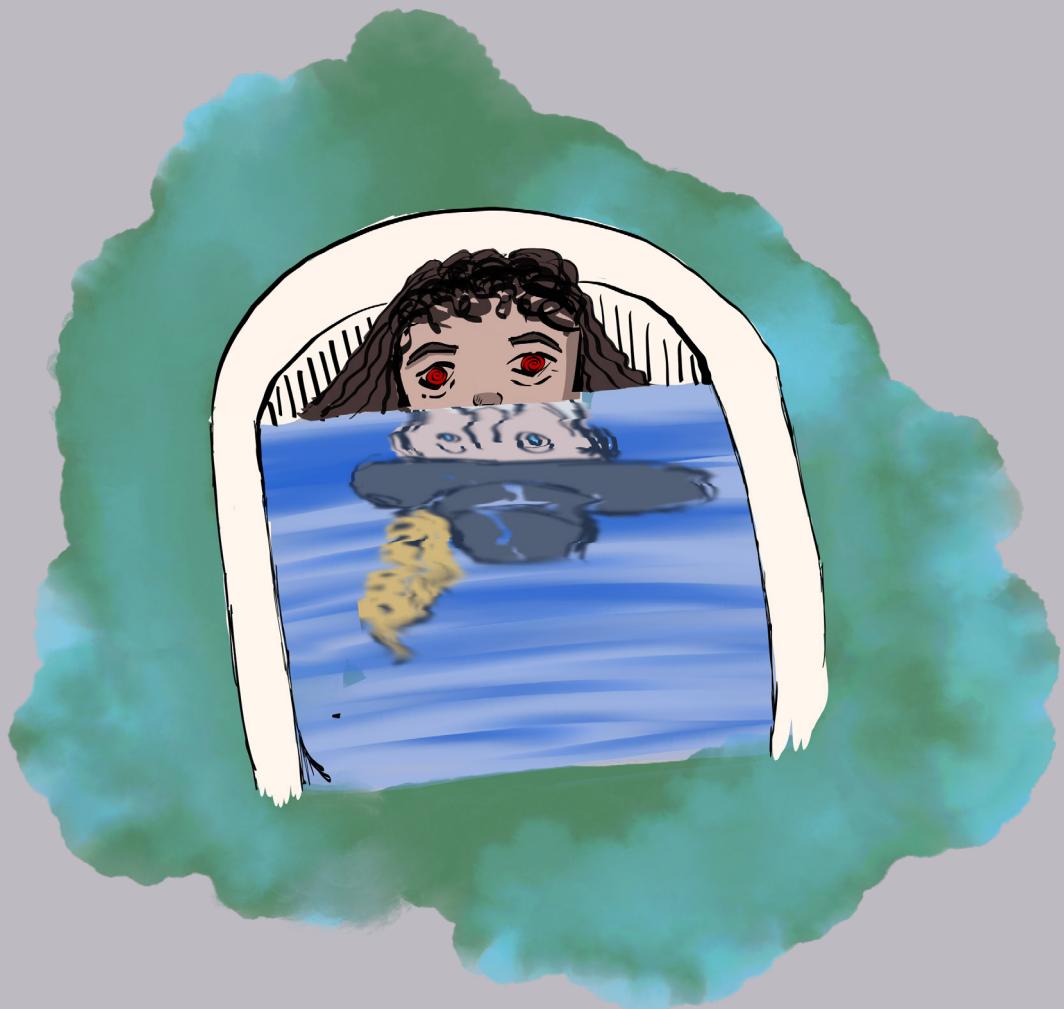
Jayanto did not accept the idea immediately, nor did I say anything further.

He went and had his bath after a little bit of persuasion.

At lunch, he ate nothing except a couple of chapatis with meat curry, although I knew he was quite fond of his food.

After lunch we went and sat in the cane chairs on the veranda that overlooked the garden. There appeared to be no one else in the circuit house. There was something eerie about the silence that afternoon. All we could hear was the noise made by a few monkeys sitting on the gulmohar tree across the cobbled path.

Around 3 p.m., we saw a man come into the garden, carrying a watering can. He was an old man. His hair, moustaches and sideburns all were white.



'Will you ask him or should I?'

At this question from Jayanto, I raised a reassuring hand and went straight to the gardener. After I had spoken to him, he looked at me rather suspiciously. Clearly, no one had ever made such a request. 'Why, babu?' he asked.

I laid a friendly hand on his shoulder and said, 'Don't worry about the reason. I'll give you five rupees. Please do as you're told.'

He relented, going so far as to give me a salute accompanied by a broad grin.

I beckoned to Jayanto, who was still sitting on the veranda. He rose and began walking towards me. As he came closer, I saw the pallor on his face.

I did hope we would find at least some part of the doll. The gardener, in the meantime, had fetched a spade. The three of us made our way to the deodar tree. Jayanto pointed at the ground about a yard from the trunk of the tree and said, 'Here.'

'Are you sure?' I asked him.

Jayanto nodded silently.

'How much did you dig?'

'At least eight inches.'

The gardener started digging. The man had a sense of humour. As he lifted his spade, he asked if there was hidden treasure under the ground and, if so, whether we would be prepared to share it with him.

I had to laugh at this, but Jayanto's face did not register even the slightest trace of amusement. It was the month of October and not at all warm in Bundi. Yet the collar of his shirt was soaked in sweat.



He was staring at the ground unblinkingly. The gardener continued to dig. Why was there no sign of the doll?

The raucous cry of a peacock made me turn my head for a moment and, in that instant, Jayanto made a strange sound. I quickly looked at him. His eyes were bulging. He raised his right hand and pointed at the hole in the ground with a finger that was visibly trembling.

Then he asked in a voice turned hoarse with fear, 'What . . . what is that?'

The spade slipped from the gardener's hand. I, too, gaped at the ground, open-mouthed in horror, amazement and disbelief.

There lay at our feet, covered in dust, lying flat on its back,

a twelve inch-long

pure white,

perfect little

human skeleton.





Character Guide



Jayanto, the protagonist of this story is a nervous and paranoid man in his portrayal throughout this story. Grappling with the nostalgia of visiting his childhood home and feeling like his childhood doll has intentions of haunting him, he remains rather conflicted

Shankar, the ever logical best friend is brought to page as this humanoid void right out of Jayanto's vivid imagination. His existence, never having been too sketched out in the initial story is presented by the illustrator as Jayanto's spiralling imagination.



Fritz, the german doll of an old man and Jayanto's obsession regardless of his age, may it be in contrasting ways is in a way perhaps the antagonist of this story. He brings to the story the atmosphere itself, in ways only a haunted childhood doll could ever accomplish.

The Gardener, a minor character in this story he still holds significance due to having been the one to dig out the skeleton that brought together the beautifully every ending to the story.



About the Author

Satyajit Ray (born May 2, 1921, Calcutta [now Kolkata], India—died April 23, 1992, Calcutta) was a Bengali motion-picture director, writer, and illustrator who brought the Indian cinema to world recognition with *Pather Panchali* and its two sequels, known as the Apu Trilogy. He was one of the greatest filmmakers of the 20th century.

The motion-picture director also established a parallel career in Bengal as a writer and an illustrator, chiefly for young people.

Ray was the author of numerous short stories and novellas, and in fact writing, rather than filmmaking, became his main source of income. His stories have been translated and published in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.



About the Illustrator



Akshitha Gopikrishnan has loved drawing ever since getting her hands on her first pack of crayons, initially adorning the walls of her house with her imagination and later on more socially accepted canvases.

Today, she brings stories to life with playful illustrations full of color and imagination with just the right little twist to it. When she isn't sketching characters or getting her hands on her next story, Akshitha can be found on her grand mission to try every cafe's hazelnut ice coffee or adding frog doodles to any surface given to her and every cat that presents itself within a 10 km radius.





See you again.

- FRITZ

