Stories
Short and Sweet

Ruskin Bond
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Rupa & Co
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Those Three Bears

Most Himalayan villages lie in the valleys, where there are small streams, some farmland, and protection from the biting winds that come through the mountain passes in winter. The houses are usually made of large stones and have sloping slate roofs so the heavy monsoon rain can run off easily. During the sunny autumn months, the roofs are often covered with pumpkins, left there to ripen in the sun.

One October night, when I was sleeping at a friend's house in a village in these hills, I was awakened by a rumbling and thumping on the roof. I woke my friend and asked him what was happening.
'It's only a bear,' he said.
'Is it trying to get in?'
'No. It's after the pumpkins.'
A little later, when we looked out a window, we saw a black bear making off through a field, leaving a trail of half-eaten pumpkins.
Face to Face

In winter, when snow covers the higher ranges, the Himalayan bears come to lower altitudes in search of food. Sometimes they forage in fields and because they are shortsighted and suspicious of anything that moves, they can be dangerous. But, like most wild animals, they avoid humans as much as possible.

Village folk always advise me to run downhill if chased by a bear. They say bears find it easier to run uphill than down. I am yet to be chased by a bear, and will happily skip the experience. But I have seen a few of these mountain bears in India, and they are always fascinating to watch.

Himalayan bears enjoy pumpkins, corn, plums, and apricots. Once, while I was sitting in an oak tree hoping to see a pair of pine martens that lived nearby, I heard the whining grumble of a bear, and presently a small bear ambled into the clearing beneath the tree.

He was little more than a cub, and I was not alarmed. I sat very still, waiting to see what he would do.

He put his nose to the ground and sniffed his way along until he came to a large anthill. Here he began huffing and puffing, blowing rapidly in and out of his nostrils, so that the dust from the anthill flew in all directions. But the anthill had been deserted, and so, grumbling, the bear made his way up a nearby plum tree. Soon he was perched high in the branches. It was then that he saw me.

The bear at once scrambled several feet higher up the tree and lay flat on a branch. Since it wasn't a very big branch, there was a lot of bear showing on either side. He tucked his head behind another branch. He could no longer see me, so he apparently was satisfied that he was hidden, although he couldn't help grumbling.

Like all bears, this one was full of curiosity. So, slowly, inch by inch, his black snout appeared over the edge of the branch. As soon as he saw me, he drew his head back and hid his face.

He did this several times. I waited until he wasn't looking, then moved some way down my tree. When the bear looked over and saw that I was missing, he was so pleased that he stretched right across to another branch and helped himself to a plum. I couldn't help bursting into laughter.

The startled young bear tumbled out of the tree, dropped through the branches some fifteen feet, and landed with a thump in a pile of dried leaves. He was unhurt, but fled from the clearing, grunting and squealing all the way.

The Flag 'Bearer'

Another time, my friend Prem told me, a bear had been active in his cornfield. We
took up a post at night in an old cattle shed, which gave a clear view of the moonlit field.

A little after midnight, a female bear came down to the edge of the field. She seemed to sense that we had been about. She was hungry, however. So, after standing on her hind legs and peering around to make sure the field was empty, she came cautiously out of the forest.

Her attention was soon distracted by some Tibetan prayer flags, which had been strung between two trees. She gave a grunt of disapproval and began to back away, but the fluttering of the flags was a puzzle that she wanted to solve. So she stopped and watched them.

Soon the bear advanced to within a few feet of the flags, examining them from various angles. Then, seeing that they posed no danger she went right up to the flags and pulled them down. Grunting with apparent satisfaction, she moved into the field of corn.

Prem had decided that he didn't want to lose any more of his crop, so he started shouting. His children woke up and soon came running from the house, banging on empty kerosene tins.

Deprived of her dinner, the bear made off in a bad temper. She ran downhill at a good speed, and I was glad that I was not in her way.

Uphill or downhill, an angry bear is best given a very wide path.
The Coral Tree

The night had been hot, the rain frequent, and I had been sleeping on the verandah instead of in the house. I was in my twenties, had begun to earn a living and felt I had certain responsibilities.

In short, a tonga would take me to the railway station, and from there a train would take me to Bombay, and then a ship would take me to England. There would be work, interviews, a job, a different kind of life, so many things that this small bungalow of my grandfather's would be remembered fitfully, in rare moments of reflection.

When I awoke on the verandah, I saw a grey morning, smelt the rain on the red earth and remembered that I had to go away. A girl was standing on the verandah porch, looking at me very seriously. When I saw her, I sat up in bed with a start.

She was a small dark girl, her eyes big and black, her pig-tails tied up in a bright red ribbon and she was fresh and clean like the rain and the red earth.

She stood looking at me and was very serious.

'Hullo,' I said, smiling and trying to put her at ease. But the girl was business-like and acknowledged my greeting with a brief nod.

'Can I do anything for you?' I asked, stretching my limbs. 'Do you stay nearby?'

With great assurance she said, 'Yes, but I can stay on my own.'

'You're like me,' I said, and for a while, forgot about being an old man of twenty.

'I like to be on my own but I'm going away today.'

'Oh,' she said, a little breathlessly.

'Would you care to go to England?'

'I want to go everywhere,' she said. 'To America and Africa and Japan and Honolulu.'

'Maybe you will,' I said. 'I'm going everywhere, and no one can stop me...,' 'But what is it you want, what did you come for?'

'I want some flowers but I can't reach them.' She waved her hand towards the garden, 'That tree, see?'

The coral tree stood in front of the house surrounded by pools of water and broken, fallen blossoms. The branches of the tree were thick with scarlet, pea-shaped flowers.

'All right, just let me get ready.'
The tree was easy to climb and I made myself comfortable on one of the lower branches, smiling down at the serious upturned face of the girl.

'I'll throw them down to you,' I said.

I bent a branch but the wood was young and green and I had to twist it several times before it snapped.

'I'm not sure I ought to do this,' I said as I dropped the flowering branch to the girl.

'Don't worry,' she said.

I felt a sudden nostalgic longing for childhood and an urge to remain behind in my grandfather house with its tangled memories and ghosts of yesteryear. But I was the only one left and what could I do except climb tamarind and jackfruit trees.

'Have you many friends?' I asked.

'Oh yes.'

'And who is the best?'

'The cook. He lets me stay in the kitchen which is more interesting than the house. And I like to watch him cooking. And he gives me things to eat and tells me stories...'

'And who is your second best friend?'

She inclined her head to one side and thought very hard.

'I'll make you second best,' she said.

I sprinkled coral blossoms on her head. 'That's very kind of you. I'm happy to be second best.'

A tonga bell sounded at the gate and I looked out from the tree and said, 'It's come for me. I have to go now.'

I climbed down.

'Will you help me with my suitcases?' I asked, as we walked together towards the verandah. 'There's no one here to help me. I am the last to go. Not because I want to go but because I have to.'

I sat down on the cot and packed a few last things in my suitcase. All the doors of the house were locked. On my way to the station, I would leave the keys with the caretaker. I had already given instructions to the agent to try and sell the house. There was nothing more to be done. We walked in silence to the waiting tonga, thinking and wondering about each other. The girl stood at the side of the path, on the damp earth, looking at me.

'Thank you,' I said, 'I hope I shall see you again.'

'I'll see you in London,' she said. 'Or America or Japan, I want to go everywhere.'

'I'm sure you will,' I said. 'And perhaps, I'll come back and we'll meet again in this garden. That would be nice, wouldn't it?'

She nodded and smiled. We knew it was an important moment. The tonga driver spoke to his pony and the carriage set off down the gravel path, rattling a little. The
girl and I waved to each other. In the girl's hand was a spring of coral blossom. As she waved, the blossoms fell apart and danced lightly in the breeze.

'Goodbye!' I called.

'Goodbye!' called the girl.

The ribbon had come loose from her pigtail and lay on the ground with the coral blossoms.

And she was fresh and clean like the rain and the red earth.
He who Rides a Tiger

To the boatmen of the Hoogly and the wood-cutters and honey-gatherers of the Sunderbans, 'Gazi Saheb' is a name that is still invoked in times of storm or stress. Stories of the magical powers of this wonderful fakir have come down to us in song and legend.

In the south of Calcutta where the town of Baruipur now stands, there was once a dense, impenetrable jungle laced with crocodile-infested creeks. Into this wasteland came a fakir, Mobrah Gazi by name, to take up his residence at a place called Basra. He so overawed the wild animals that they became his servants, and the 'Gazi Saheb' as he came to be known was often seen riding about on a tiger.

It is said that the zamindar of the pargana in which Basra was situated was placed under arrest because he was unable to pay the annual revenue to the Emperor at Delhi. The zamindar's mother, fearing for her son's life sought the assistance of the great Gazi. The fakir promised his aid.

After sending the woman home, he dismounted from his royal Bengal tiger and sat down in deep meditation. So great were his powers that his thoughts were telegraphed over the many hundred miles separating his jungle from Delhi and he gave the Emperor a dream in which he, Gazi Saheb, appeared surrounded by wild beasts, saying that he was the proprietor of the Basra jungles and that the zamindar's dues would be paid from his own treasures buried in the forest. He told the Emperor to have the zamindar released, threatening him with every misfortune if he disobeyed.

The Emperor awoke late the next morning and, overtaken by the business of his court, forgot the dream. The following morning when he ascended his throne, instead of seeing the usual courtiers and attendants, he found himself surrounded by wild animals. He immediately remembered the dream and in great haste ordered the release of the zamindar. The animals vanished. A few weeks later the revenue arrived, paid out of the Gazi's treasure.

In gratitude for the Gazi's aid, the zamindar erected a mosque in the jungles of Basra as a residence for the saint but the Gazi Saheb, who had no use for material possessions and used his mysterious treasure only to assist others, said that he preferred the shelter of the forests in the sunshine and rain and desired neither a mosque nor house. The zamindar then ordered that every village in his zamindari
should erect an altar dedicated to Gazi Saheb 'King of the Sunderbans and of the wild beasts,' and warned his tenants that if they failed to make an offering before going into the jungle they would almost certainly be devoured by tigers or crocodiles.

And so even today, between Calcutta and the sea, the Gazi Saheb is recognised as a saint in many of the villages of the Sunderbans and his name is held in reverence by both Hindus and Muslims.

There is no record of the Gazi Saheb ever having taken a wife, yet there are a number of fakirs who call themselves his descendants, gaining a livelihood from the offerings of boatmen and wood-cutters. That they do not have the powers of the original Gazi have been proved more than once, for it is usually the fakirs and not the village folk who are carried off by tigers or crocodiles.

Many people have tried to ascertain the whereabouts of the tomb of Gazi Saheb. Some declare it lies near Baruipur where the saint first took up his abode. Others say that it is to be found in the jungles of Sagar Island 'by the creek that runs into the sea.' And there are some who feel sure that there is no tomb and that the Gazi Saheb left this earth in no ordinary way but was taken to Paradise, riding on the back of a royal Bengal tiger.
I was still a thief when I met Romi. And though I was only fifteen years old, I was an experienced and fairly successful hand. Romi was watching a wrestling match when I approached him. He was about twenty-five and he looked easygoing, kind, and simple enough for my purpose. I was sure I would be able to win the young man's confidence.

'You look a bit of a wrestler yourself,' I said. There's nothing like flattery to break the ice!

'So do you,' he replied, which put me off for a moment because at that time I was rather thin and bony.

'Well,' I said modestly, 'I do wrestle a bit.'
'What's your name?'
'Hari Singh,' I lied. I took a new name every month, which kept me ahead of the police and former employers.

After these formalities Romi confined himself to comenting on the wrestlers, who were grunting, gasping, and heaving each other about. When he walked away, I
followed him casually.

'Hello again,' he said.

I gave him my most appealing smile. 'I want to work for you,' I said.

'But I can't pay you anything – not for some time, anyway.'

I thought that over for a minute. Perhaps I had misjudged my man. 'Can you feed me?' I asked.

'Can you cook?'

'I can cook,' I lied again.

'If you can cook, then maybe I can feed you.'

He took me to his room over the Delhi Sweet Shop and told me I could sleep in the balcony. But the meal I cooked that night must have been terrible because Romi gave it to a stray dog and told me to be off.

But I just hung around, smiling in my most appealing way, and he couldn't help laughing.

Later, he said, never mind, he'd teach me to cook. He also taught me to write my name and said he would soon teach me to write whole sentences and to add figures. I was grateful. I knew that once I could write like an educated person, there would be no limit to what I could achieve.

It was quite pleasant working for Romi. I made tea in the morning and then took my time buying the day's supplies, usually making a profit of two or three rupees. I think he knew I made a little money this way, but he didn't seem to mind.

Romi made money by fits and starts. He would borrow one week, lend the next. He kept worrying about his next check, but as soon as it arrived he would go out and celebrate. He wrote for the *Delhi* and *Bombay* magazines: a strange way to make a living.

One evening he came home with a small bundle of notes, saying he had just sold a book to a publisher. That night I saw him put the money in an envelope and tuck it under the mattress.

I had been working for Romi for almost a month and, apart from cheating on the shopping, had not done anything big in my real line of work. I had every opportunity for doing so. I could come and go as I pleased, and Romi was the most trusting person I had ever met.

That was why it was so difficult to rob him. It was easy for me to rob a greedy man. But robbing a nice man could be a problem. And if he doesn't notice he's being robbed, then all the spice goes out of the undertaking!

Well, it's time I got down to some real work, I told myself. If I don't take the money, he'll only waste it on his so-called friends. After all, he doesn't even give me a salary.

Romi was sleeping peacefully. A beam of moonlight reached over the balcony and fell on his bed. I sat on the floor, considering the situation. If I took the money, I
could catch the 10.30 express to Lucknow. Slipping out of my blanket, I crept over to the bed.

My hand slid under the mattress, searching for the notes. When I found the packet, I drew it out without a sound. Romi sighed in his sleep and turned on his side. Startled, I moved quickly out of the room.

Once on the road, I began to run. I had the money stuffed into a vest pocket under my shirt. When I'd gotten some distance from Romi's place, I slowed to a walk and, taking the envelope from my pocket, counted the money. Seven hundred rupees in fifties. I could live like a prince for a week or two!

When I reached the station, I did not stop at the ticket office (I had never bought a ticket in my life) but dashed straight onto the platform. The Lucknow Express was just moving out. The train had still to pick up speed and I should have been able to jump into one of the compartments, but I hesitated – for some reason I can't explain – and I lost the chance to get away.

When the train had gone, I found myself standing alone on the deserted platform. I had no idea where to spend the night. I had no friends, believing that friends were more trouble than help. And I did not want to arouse curiosity by staying at one of the small hotels nearby. The only person I knew really well was the man I had robbed. Leaving the station, I walked slowly through the bazaar.

In my short career, I had made a study of people's faces after they had discovered the loss of their valuables. The greedy showed panic; the rich showed anger; the poor, resignation. But I knew that Romi's face when he discovered the theft would show only a touch of sadness – not for the loss of money, but for the loss of trust.

The night was chilly – November nights can be cold in northern India – and a shower of rain added to my discomfort. I sat down in the shelter of the clock tower. A few beggars and vagrants lay beside me, rolled up tight in their blankets. The clock showed midnight. I felt for the notes; they were soaked through.

Romi's money. In the morning, he would probably have given me five rupees to go to the movies, but now I had it all: no more cooking meals, running to the bazaar, or learning to write sentences.

Sentences! I had forgotten about them in the excitement of the theft. Writing complete sentences, I knew, could one day bring me more than a few hundred rupees. It was a simple matter to steal. But to be a really big man, a clever and respected man, was something else. I should go back to Romi, I told myself, if only to learn to read and write.

I hurried back to the room feeling very nervous, for it is much easier to steal something than to return it undetected.

I opened the door quietly, then stood in the doorway in clouded moonlight. Romi was still asleep. I crept to the head of the bed, and my hand came up with the packet of notes. I felt his breath on my hand. I remained still for a few moments. Then my
fingers found the edge of the mattress, and I slipped the money beneath it.

I awoke late the next morning to find that Romi had already made the tea. He stretched out a hand to me. There was a fifty-rupee note between his fingers. My heart sank.

'I made some money yesterday,' he said. 'Now I'll be able to pay you regularly.'

My spirits rose. But when I took the note, I noticed that it was still wet from the night's rain. So he knew what I'd done. But neither his lips nor his eyes revealed anything.

'Today we'll start writing sentences,' he said.

I smiled at Romi in my most appealing way. And the smile came by itself, without any effort.
When the Trees Walked

One morning while I was sitting beside Grandfather on the verandah steps, I noticed the tendril of a creeping vine trailing nearby. As we sat there in the soft sunshine of a north Indian winter, I saw the tendril moving slowly towards Grandfather. Twenty minutes later, it had crossed the step and was touching his feet.

There is probably a scientific explanation for the plant's behaviour – something to do with light and warmth perhaps – but I liked to think it moved across the steps simply because it wanted to be near Grandfather. One always felt like drawing close to him. Sometimes when I sat by myself beneath a tree, I would feel rather lonely but as soon as Grandfather joined me, the garden became a happy place. Grandfather had served many years in the Indian Forest Service and it was natural that he should know trees and like them. On his retirement, he built a bungalow on the outskirts of Dehra Dun, planting trees all around. Lime, mango, orange and guava, also eucalyptus, jacaranda, and Persian lilacs. In the fertile Doon Valley plants and trees grew tall and strong.

There were other trees in the compound before the house was built, including an old peepul that had forced its way through the walls of an abandoned outhouse, knocking the bricks down with its vigorous growth. Peepul trees are great showoffs. Even when there is no breeze, their broad-chested, slim-waisted leaves will spin like tops determined to attract your attention and invite you into the shade. Grandmother had wanted the peepul tree cut down but Grandfather had said, 'Let it be, we can always build another outhouse.'

Grandmother didn't mind trees, but she preferred growing flowers and was constantly ordering catalogues and seeds. Grandfather helped her out with the gardening not because he was crazy about flower gardens but because he liked watching butterflies and 'there's only one way to attract butterflies,' he said, 'and that is to grow flowers for them.'

Grandfather wasn't content with growing trees in our compound. During the rains, he would walk into the jungle beyond the riverbed armed with cuttings and saplings which he would plant in the forest.

'But no one ever comes here!' I had protested, the first time we did this. 'Who's going to see them?'

'See, we're not planting them simply to improve the view,' replied Grandfather.
'We're planting them for the forest and for the animals and birds who live here and need more food and shelter.'

'Of course, men need trees too,' he added. 'To keep the desert away, to attract rain, to prevent the banks of rivers from being washed away, for fruit and flowers, leaf and seed. Yes, for timber too. But men are cutting down trees without replacing them and if we don't plant a few trees ourselves, a time will come when the world will be one great desert.'

The thought of a world without trees became a sort of nightmare to me and I helped Grandfather in his tree-planting with greater enthusiasm. And while we went about our work, he taught me a poem by George Morris:

> Woodman, spare that tree!
> Touch not a single bough!
> In youth it sheltered me,
> And I'll protect it now.

'O one day the trees will move again,' said Grandfather. 'They've been standing for thousands of years but there was a time when they could walk about like people. Then along came an interfering busybody who cast a spell over them, rooting them to one place. But they're always trying to move. See how they reach out with their arms! And some of them, like the banyan tree with its travelling aerial roots, manage to get quite far.'

We found an island, a small rocky island in a dry river bed. It was one of those river beds so common in the foothills, which are completely dry in summer but flooded during the monsoon rains. A small mango was growing on the island. 'If a small tree can grow here,' said Grandfather, 'so can others.' As soon as the rains set in and while rivers could still be crossed, we set out with a number of tamarind, laburnum, and coral tree saplings and cuttings and spent the day planting them on the island.

The monsoon season was the time for rambling about. At every turn, there was something new to see. Out of the earth and rock and leafless boughs, the magic touch of the rains had brought life and greenness. You could see the broad-leaved vines growing. Plants sprang up in the most unlikely of places. A peepul would take root in the ceiling, a mango would sprout on the window sill. We did not like to remove them but they had to go if the house was to be kept from falling down.

'If you want to live in a tree, that's all right by me,' said Grandmother crossly. 'But I like having a roof over my head and I'm not going to have my roof brought down by the jungle.'

Then came the Second World War and I was sent away to a boarding school. During the holidays, I went to live with my father in Delhi. Meanwhile, my grandparents sold the house and went to England. Two or three years later, I too went to England and was away from India for several years.
Some years later, I returned to Dehra Dun. After first visiting the old house – it hadn't changed much – I walked out of town towards the river-bed. It was February. As I looked across the dry water-course, my eye was immediately caught by the spectacular red blooms of the coral blossom. In contrast with the dry riverbed, the island was a small green paradise. When I went up to the trees, I noticed that some squirrels were living in them and a koel, a crow pheasant, challenged me with a mellow 'who-are-you, who-are-you'.

But the trees seemed to know me; they whispered among themselves and beckoned me nearer. And looking around I noticed that other smaller trees, wild plants and grasses had sprung up under their protection. Yes, the trees we had planted long ago had multiplied. They were walking again. In one small corner of the world, Grandfather's dream had come true.
The Oaks, Hunter's Lodge, The Parsonage, The Pines, Dumbarnie, Mackinnon's Hall, and Windermere. These are names of some of the old houses that still stand on the outskirts of one of the smaller Indian hill-stations. They were built over a hundred years ago by British settlers who sought relief from the searing heat of the plains. Most have fallen into decay and are now inhabited by wild cats, owls, goats, and the occasional mule-driver.

But among these neglected mansions stands a neat, white-washed cottage, Mulberry Lodge. And in it lived an elderly British spinster named Miss Mackenzie. She was sprightly and wore old-fashioned but well-preserved dresses. Once a week, she walked up to town and bought butter, jam, soap and sometimes a bottle of eau-de-cologne.

Miss Mackenzie had lived there since her teens, before World War I. Her parents, brother, and sister were all dead. She had no relatives in India, and lived on a small pension and gift parcels sent by a childhood friend. She had few visitors – the local padre, the postman, the milkman. Like other lonely old people, she kept a pet, a large black cat with bright, yellow eyes.

In a small garden, she grew dahlias, chrysanthemums, gladioli and a few rare orchids. She knew a great deal about wild flowers, trees, birds, and insects. She never seriously studied them, but had an intimacy with all that grew and flourished around her.

It was September, and the rains were nearly over. Miss Mackenzie's African marigolds were blooming. She hoped the coming winter wouldn't be too severe because she found it increasingly difficult to bear the cold. One day, as she was putting about in her garden, she saw a schoolboy plucking wild flowers on the slope above the cottage. 'What're you up to, young man?' she called.

Alarmed, the boy tried to dash up the hillside, but slipped on pine needles and slid down the slope into Miss Mackenzie's nasturtium bed. Finding no escape, he gave a bright smile and said, 'Good morning, Miss.'

'Good morning,' said Miss Mackenzie severely. 'Would you mind moving out of my flower bed?'

The boy stepped gingerly over the nasturtiums, and looked at Miss Mackenzie with appealing eyes.
'You ought to be in school,' she said. 'What're you doing here?'
'Picking flowers, Miss.' He held up a bunch of ferns and wild flowers.
'Oh,' Miss Mackenzie was disarmed. It had been a long time since she had seen a boy taking an interest in flowers.
'Do you like flowers?' she asked.
'Yes, Miss. I'm going to be a botan...a botanitist.'
'You mean a botanist?'
'Yes, Miss.'
'That's unusual. Do you know the names of these flowers?'
'This is a buttercup,' he said, showing her a small golden flower. 'But I don't know what this is,' he said, holding out a pale, pink flower with a heart-shaped leaf.
'It's wild begonia,' said Miss Mackenzie. 'And that purple stuff is salvia. Do you have any books on flowers?'
'No, Miss.'
'Come in and I'll show you one.'
She led the boy into a small front room crowded with furniture, books, vases, and jam jars. He sat awkwardly on the edge of the chair. The cat jumped immediately on to his knees and settled down, purring softly.
'What's your name?' asked Miss Mackenzie, as she rummaged through her books.
'Anil, Miss.'
'And where do you live?'
'When school closes, I go to Delhi. My father has a business there.'
'Oh, and what's that?'
'Bulbs, Miss.'
'Flower bulbs?'
'No electric bulbs.'
'Ah, here we are!' she said taking a heavy tome from the shelf. *Flora Himaliensis*, published in 1892, and probably the only copy in India. This is a valuable book, Anil. No other naturalist has recorded as many wild Himalayan flowers. But there are still many plants unknown to the botanists who spend all their time at microscopes instead of in the mountains. Perhaps you'll do something about that one day.'
'Yes, Miss.'
She lit the stove, and put the kettle on for tea. And then the old English lady and the small Indian boy sat side by side, absorbed in the book. Miss Mackenzie pointed out many flowers that grew around the hill-station, while the boy made notes of their names and seasons.
'May I come again?' asked Anil, when finally he rose to go.
'If you like,' said Miss Mackenzie. 'But not during school hours. You mustn't miss your classes.'
After that, Anil visited Miss Mackenzie about once a week, and nearly always brought a wild flower for her to identify. She looked forward to the boy's visits. Sometimes when more than a week passed and he didn't come, she would grumble at the cat.

By the middle of October, with only a fortnight left before school closed, snow fell on the distant mountains. One peak stood high above the others, a white pinnacle against an azure; sky. When the sun set, the peak turned from orange to pink to red.

'How high is that mountain?' asked Anil.

'It must be over 12,000 feet,' said Miss Mackenzie.

'I always wanted to go there, but there is no proper road. At that height, there'll be flowers that you don't get here: blue gention, purple columbine.'

The day before school closed, Anil came to say good-bye. As he was about to leave, Miss Mackenzie thrust the *Flora Himaliensis* into his hands. 'It's a gift,' she said.

'But I'll be back next year, and I'll be able to look at it then. Besides, it's so valuable!'

'That's why I'm giving it to you. Otherwise, it will fall into the hands of the junk dealers.'

'But, Miss...'

'Don't argue.'

The boy tucked the book under his arm, stood at attention, and said, 'Good-bye, Miss Mackenzie.' It was the first time he had spoken her name.

Strong winds soon brought rain and sleet, killing the flowers in the garden. The cat stayed indoors, curled up at the foot of the bed. Miss Mackenzie wrapped herself in old shawls and mufflers, but still felt cold. Her fingers grew so stiff that it took almost an hour to open a can of baked beans. Then it snowed, and for several days, the milkman did not come.

Tired, she spent most of her time in bed. It was the warmest place. She kept a hot-water bottle against her back, and the cat kept her feet warm. She dreamed of spring and summer. In three months, the primroses would be out, and Anil would return.

One night the hot-water bottle burst, soaking the bed. The sun didn't shine for several days, and the blankets remained damp. Miss Mackenzie caught a chill and had to keep to her cold, uncomfortable bed.

A strong wind sprang up one night and blew the bedroom window open. Miss Mackenzie was too weak to get up and close it. The wind swept the rain and sleet into the room. The cat snuggled close to its mistress's body. Toward morning, the body lost its warmth, and the cat left the bed and started scratching about the floor.

As sunlight streamed through the window, the milkman arrived. He poured some milk into the saucer on the doorstep, and the cat jumped down from the window-sill.

The milkman called out a greeting to Miss Mackenzie. There was no answer.
Knowing she was always up before sunrise, he poked his head in the open window and called again.

Miss Mackenzie did not answer. She had gone to the mountain, where the blue gentian and purple columbine grow.
About fifty years ago, in Dehra Dun there lived a very happily married couple – an English colonel and his wife. They were both enthusiastic gardeners, and their beautiful bungalow was covered with bougainvillea, while in the garden the fragrance of the jasmine challenged the sweet fragrance of the honeysuckle. They had lived together many years when the wife suddenly became very ill. Nothing could be done for her. As she lay dying, she told her family and her servants that she would return to the garden in the form of a white pigeon, so that she could be near her husband and the place she had loved so dearly.
Years passed, but no white pigeon appeared. The colonel was lonely; and when he met an attractive widow, a few years younger to him, he married her and brought her home to his beautiful house. But as he was carrying his new bride through the porch and up the verandah steps, a white pigeon came fluttering into the garden and perched on a jasmine bush. There it remained for a long time, cooing and
murmuring in a sad, subdued manner.

Afterwards, it entered the garden every day and alighted on the jasmine bush, where it would call sadly and persistently. The servants became upset and frightened. They remembered the dying promise of their former mistress, and they were convinced that her spirit dwelt in the white pigeon.

When she heard the story, the Colonel's new wife was very upset. When the Colonel saw how troubled she was, he decided to do something about it. So when the pigeon appeared the next day, he took his gun and slipped out of the house, stealthily making his way down the verandah steps. When he saw the pigeon on the jasmine bush, he raised his gun and fired.

There was a woman's high-pitched scream. And then the pigeon flew away, its white breast dark with blood.

That same night the Colonel died in his sleep. No one ever knew the reason for his sudden death. When I looked up the cause of death in the local Burial Register, I saw that it had been given as 'Respiratory failure'. In other words, he had just stopped breathing!

The Colonel's widow left Dehra Dun, and the beautiful bungalow fell into ruin. You can still see the ruins, on the banks of the Bindal watercourse. The garden has become a jungle, and jackals slink through the roofless rooms.

The Colonel was buried in the grounds of his estate, and the gravestone is still there, although the inscription has long since disappeared.

Few people pass that way. But those who do say that they have often seen a white pigeon resting on the grave, and that on its white breast a crimson stain could be noticed.
Pret in the House

It was Grandmother who decided that we must move to another house. And it was all because of a *pret*, a mischievous ghost, who had been making life intolerable for everyone.

In India, pretss usually live in peepul trees, and that's where our Pret first had his abode – in the branches of an old peepul which had grown through the compound wall and had spread into the garden, on our side, and over the road, on the other side.

For many years, the Pret had lived there quite happily without bothering anyone in the house. I suppose the traffic on the road had kept him fully occupied. Sometimes, when a *tonga* was passing, he would frighten the pony and, as a result, the little pony-cart would go reeling off the road. Occasionally he would get into the engine of a car or bus, which would soon afterwards have a breakdown. And he liked to knock the sola-topis off the heads of sahibs, who would curse and wonder how a breeze had sprung up so suddenly, only to die down again just as quickly. Although the Pret could make himself felt, and sometimes heard, he was invisible to the human eye.
At night, people avoided walking beneath the peepul tree. It was said that if you yawned beneath the tree, the Pret would jump down your throat and ruin your digestion. Grandmother’s tailor, Jaspal, who never had anything ready on time, blamed the Pret for all his troubles. Once, when yawning, Jaspal had forgotten to
snap his fingers in front of his mouth – always mandatory when yawning beneath peepul trees – and the Pret had got in without any difficulty. Since then, Jaspal had always been suffering from tummy upsets.

But it had left our family alone until, one day, the peepul tree had been cut down.

It was nobody's fault except, of course, that Grandfather had given the Public Works Department permission to cut the tree which had been standing on our land. They wanted to widen the road, and the tree and a bit of wall were in the way; so both had to go. In any case, not even a ghost can prevail against the PWD. But hardly a day had passed when we discovered that the Pret, deprived of his tree, had decided to take up residence in the bungalow. And since a good Pret must be bad in order to justify his existence, he was soon up to all sorts of mischief in the house.

He began by hiding Grandmother's spectacles whenever she took them off.

'I'm sure I put them down on the dressing-table,' she grumbled.

A little later they where found balanced precariously on the snout of a wild boar, whose stuffed and mounted head adorned the verandah wall. Being the only boy in the house, I was at first blamed for this prank; but a day or two later, when the spectacles disappeared again only to be discovered dangling from the wires of the parrot's cage, it was agreed that some other agency was at work.

Grandfather was the next to be troubled. He went into the garden one morning to find all his prize sweet-peas snipped off and lying on the ground.

Uncle Ken was the next to suffer. He was a heavy sleeper, and once he'd gone to bed, he hated being woken up. So when he came to the breakfast table looking bleary-eyed and miserable, we asked him if he wasn't feeling all right.

'I couldn't sleep a wink last night,' he complained. 'Every time I was about to fall asleep, the bedclothes would be pulled off the bed. I had to get up at least a dozen time to pick them off the floor.' He stared balefully at me. 'Where were you sleeping last night, young man?'

I had an alibi. 'In Grandfather's room,' I said.

'That's right,' said Grandfather. 'And I'm a light sleeper. I'd have woken up if he'd been sleep-walking.'

'It's that ghost from the peepul tree,' said Grandmother.

'It has moved into the house. First my spectacles, then the sweet-peas, and now Ken's bedclothes! What will it be up to next? I wonder!'

We did not have to wonder long. There followed a series of disasters. Vases fell off tables, pictures came down the walls. Parrot feathers turned up in the teapot while the parrot himself let out indignant squawks in the middle of the night. Uncle Ken found a crow's nest in his bed, and on tossing it out of the window was attacked by two crows.

When Aunt Minnie came to stay, things got worse. The Pret seemed to take an immediate dislike to Aunt Minie. She was a nervous, easily excitable person, just the
right sort of prey for a spiteful ghost. Somehow her toothpaste got switched with a tube of Grandfather's shaving-cream, and when she appeared in the sitting-room, foaming at the mouth, we ran for our lives. Uncle Ken was shouting that she'd got rabies.

Two days later Aunt Minnie complained that she had been hit on the nose by a grapefruit, which had of its own accord taken a leap from the pantry shelf and hurtled across the room straight at her. A bruised and swollen nose testified to the attack. Aunt Minnie swore that life had been more peaceful in Upper Burma.

'We'll have to leave this house,' declared Grandmother.

'If we stay here much longer, both Ken and Minnie will have nervous breakdowns.'

'I thought Aunt Minnie broke down long ago,' I said.

'None of your cheek!' snapped Aunt Minnie.

'Anyway, I agree about changing the house,' I said breezily. 'I can't even do my homework. The ink-bottle is always empty.'

'There was ink in the soup last night.' That came from Grandfather.

And so, a few days and several disasters later, we began moving to a new house.

Two bullock-carts laden with furniture and heavy luggage were sent ahead. The roof of the old car was piled high with bags and kitchen utensils. Everyone squeezed into the car, and Grandfather took the driver's seat.

We were barely out of the gate when we heard a peculiar sound, as if someone was chuckling and talking to himself on the roof of the car.

'Is the parrot out there on the luggage-rack?' the query came from Grandfather.

'No, he's in the cage on one of the bullock-carts,' said Grandmother.

Grandfather stopped the car, got out, and took a look at the roof.

'Nothing up there,' he said, getting in again and starting the engine. 'I'm sure I heard the parrot talking.'

Grandfather had driven some way up to the road when the chuckling started again, followed by a squeaky little voice.

We all heard it. It was the Pret talking to itself.

'Let's go, let's go!' it squeaked gleefully. 'A new house. I can't wait to see it. What fun we're going to have!'
The Overcoat

It was clear frosty weather, and as the moon came up over the Himalayan peaks, I could see that patches of snow still lay on the roads of the hill-station. I would have been quite happy in bed, with a book and a hot-water bottle at my side, but I'd promised the Kapadias that I'd go to their party, and I felt it would be churlish of me to stay away. I put on two sweaters, and old football scarf, and an overcoat, and set off down the moonlit road.

It was a walk of just over a mile to the Kapadias' house, and I had covered about half the distance when I saw a girl standing in the middle of the road.

She must have been sixteen or seventeen. She looked rather old-fashioned – long hair, hanging to her waist, and a flummoxy sequined dress, pink and lavender, that reminded me of the photos in my grandmother's family album. When I went closer, I noticed that she had lovely eyes and a winning smile.

'Good evening,' I said. 'It's a cold night to be out.'

'Are you going to the party?' she asked.

'That's right. And I can see from your lovely dress that you're going too. Come along, we're nearly there.'

She fell into step beside me and we soon saw lights from the Kapadias' house shining brightly through the deodars. The girl told me her name was Julie. I hadn't seen her before but, then, I'd only been in the hill-station a few months.

There was quite a crowd at the party, and no one seemed to know Julie. Everyone thought she was a friend of mine. I did not deny it. Obviously she was someone who was feeling lonely and wanted to be friendly with people. And she was certainly enjoying herself. I did not see her do much eating or drinking, but she flitted about from one group to another, talking, listening, laughing; and when the music began, she was dancing almost continuously, alone or with partners, it didn't matter which, she was completely wrapped up in the music.

It was almost midnight when I got up to go. I had drunk a fair amount of punch, and I was ready for bed. As I was saying goodnight to my hosts and wishing everyone a merry Christmas, Julie slipped her arm into mine and said she'd be going home too.

When we were outside, I said, 'Where do you live, Julie?'

'At Wolfsburn,' she said. 'Right at the top of the hill.'
'There's a cold wind,' I said. 'And although your dress is beautiful, it doesn't look very warm. Here, you'd better wear my overcoat. I've plenty of protection.'

She did not protest, and allowed me to slip my overcoat over her shoulders. Then we started out on the walk home. But I did not have to escort her all the way. At about the spot where we had met, she said, 'There's a short cut from here. I'll just scramble up the hillside.'

'Do you know it well?' I asked. 'It's a very narrow path.'

'Oh, I know every stone on the path. I use it all the time. And besides, it's a really bright night.'

'Well, keep the coat on,' I said. 'I can collect it tomorrow.'

She hesitated for a moment, then smiled and nodded to me. She then disappeared up the hill, and I went home alone.

The next day I walked up to Wolfsburn. I crossed a little brook, from which the house had probably got its name, and entered an open iron gate. But of the house itself, little remained. Just a roofless ruin, a pile of stones, a shattered chimney, a few Doric pillars where a verandah had once stood.

Had Julie played a joke on me? Or had I found the wrong house?

I walked around the hill, to the mission house where the Taylors lived and asked old Mrs. Taylor if she knew a girl called Julie.

'No, I don't think so,' she said. 'Where does she live?'

'At Wolfsburn, I was told. But the house is just a ruin.'

'Nobody has lived at Wolfsburn for over forty years. The Mackinnons lived there. One of the old families who settled here. But when their girl died....' She stopped and gave me a queer look. 'I think her name was Julie... Anyway, when she died, they sold the house and went away. No one ever lived in it again, and it fell into decay. But it couldn't be the same Julie you're looking for. She died of consumption – there wasn't much you could do about it in those days. Her grave is in the cemetery, just down the road.'

I thanked Mrs. Taylor and walked slowly down the road to the cemetery; not really wanting to know any more, but propelled forward almost against my will.

It was a small cemetery under the deodars. You could see the eternal snows of the Himalayas standing out against the pristine blue of the sky. Here lay the bones of forgotten Empire-builders – soldiers, merchants, adventurers, their wives and children. It did not take me long to find Julie's grave. It had a simple headstone with her name clearly outlined on it:

Julie Mackinnon
1923-39
'With us one moment,
Taken the next,
Gone to her Maker,'
Gone to her rest.'
Although many monsoons had swept across the cemetery wearing down the stones, they had not touched this little tombstone.
I was turning to leave when I caught a glimpse of something familiar behind the headstone. I walked round to where it lay.
Neatly folded on the grass was my overcoat.
The Tunnel

It was almost noon, and the jungle was very still, very silent. Heat waves shimmered along the railway embankment where it cut a path through the tall evergreen trees. The railway lines were two straight black serpents disappearing into the tunnel in the hillside.

Suraj stood near the cutting, waiting for the mid-day train. It wasn't a station, and he wasn't catching a train. He was waiting so that he could watch the steam-engine come roaring out of the tunnel.

He had cycled out of the town and taken the jungle path until he had come to a small village. He had left the cycle there, and walked over a low, scrub-covered hill and down to the tunnel exit.
Now he looked up. He had heard, in the distance, the shrill whistle of the engine. He couldn't see anything, because the train was approaching from the other side of the hill—but presently a sound, like a distant thunder, issued from the tunnel, and he knew the train was coming through.
A second or two later, the steam-engine shot out of the tunnel, snorting and puffing like some green, black and gold dragon, some beautiful monster out of Suraj’s dreams. Showering sparks left and right, it roared a challenge to the jungle.

Instinctively, Suraj stepped back a few paces. Waves of hot steam struck him in the noise and heat. And then the train had gone, leaving only a plume of smoke to drift lazily over tall shisham trees.

The jungle was still again. No one moved. Suraj turned from his contemplation of the drifting smoke and began walking along the embankment towards the tunnel.

The tunnel grew darker as he walked further into it. When he had gone about twenty yards, it became pitch black. Suraj had to turn and look back at the opening to reassure himself that there was still daylight outside. Ahead of him, the tunnel’s other opening was just a small round circle of light.

The tunnel was still full of smoke from the train, but it would be several hours before another train came through. Till then, it belonged to the jungle again.

Suraj didn’t stop, because there was nothing to do in the tunnel and nothing to see. He had simply wanted to walk through, so that he would know what the inside of a tunnel was really like. The walls were damp and sticky. A bat flew past. A lizard scuttled between the lines.

Coming straight from the darkness into the light, Suraj was dazzled by the sudden glare. He put a hand up to shade his eyes and looked up at the tree-covered hillside. He thought he saw something moving between the trees.

It was just a flash of orange and gold, and a long swishing tail. It was there between the trees for a second or two, and then it was gone.

About fifty feet from the entrance to the tunnel stood the watchman’s hut. Marigolds grew in front of the hut, and at the back there was a small vegetable patch. It was the watchman’s duty to inspect the tunnel and keep it clear of obstacles. Every day, before the train came through, he would walk the length of the tunnel. If all was well, he would return to his hut and take a nap. If something was wrong, he would walk back up the line and wave a red flag and the engine-driver would slow down. At night, the watchman lit an oil lamp and made a similar inspection of the tunnel. Of course, he could not stop the train if there was a porcupine on the line. But if there was any danger to the train, he’d go back up the line and wave his lamp to the approaching engine. If all was well, he’d hang his lamp at the door of the hut and go to sleep.

He was just settling down on his cot for an afternoon nap when he saw the boy emerge from the tunnel. He waited until Suraj was only a few feet away and then said: 'Welcome, welcome, I don’t often have visitors. Sit down for a while, and tell me why you were inspecting my tunnel."

'Is it your tunnel?' asked Suraj.

'It is,' said the watchman. 'It is truly my tunnel, since no one else will have
anything to do with it. I have only lent it to the Government.'

Suraj sat down on the edge of the cot.

I wanted to see the train come through,' he said. 'And then, when it had gone, I thought I'd walk through the tunnel.'

'And what did you find in it?'

'Nothing. It was very dark. But when I came out, I thought I saw an animal - up on the hill - but I'm not sure, it moved away very quickly.'

'It was a leopard you saw,' said the watchman. 'My leopard.'

'Do you own a leopard too?'

'I do.'

'And do you lend it to the Government?'

'I do not.'

'Is it dangerous?'

'No, it's a leopard that minds its own business. It comes to this range for a few days every month.'

'Have you been here a long time?' asked Suraj.

'Many years. My name is Sunder Singh.'

'My name's Suraj.'

'There's one train during the day. And another during the night. Have you seen the night mail come through the tunnel?'

'No. At what time does it come?'

'About nine o'clock, if it isn't late. You could come and sit here with me, if you like. And after it has gone, I'll take you home.'

'I shall ask my parents,' said Suraj. 'Will it be safe?'

'Of course. It's safer in the jungle than in the town. Nothing happens to me out here, but last month, when I went I went into the town, I was almost run over by a bus.'

Sunder Singh yawned and stretched himself out on the cot. 'And now I'm going to take a nap, my friend. It is too hot to be up and about in the afternoon.'

'Everyone goes to sleep in the afternoon,' complained Suraj. 'My father lies down as soon as he's had his lunch.'

'Well, the animals also rest in the heat of the day. It is only the tribe of boys who cannot, or will not, rest.'

Sunder Singh placed a large banana-leaf over his face to keep away the flies, and was soon snoring gently. Suraj stood up, looking up and down the railway tracks. Then he began walking back to the village.

The following evening, towards dusk, as the flying foxes swooped silently out of the trees, Suraj made his way to the watchman's hut.

It had been a long hot day, but now the earth was cooling, and a light breeze was moving through the trees. It carried with it a scent of mango blossoms, the promise
of rain.

Sunder Singh was waiting for Suraj. He had watered his small garden, and the flowers looked cool and fresh. A kettle was boiling on a small oil-stove.

'I'm making tea,' he said. 'There's nothing like a glass of hot tea while waiting for a train.'

They drank their tea, listening to the sharp notes of the tailorbird and the noisy chatter of the seven-sisters. As the brief twilight faded, most of the birds fell silent. Sunder Singh lit his oil-lamp and said it was time for him to inspect the tunnel. He moved off towards the tunnel, while Suraj sat on the cot, sipping his tea. In the dark, the trees seemed to move closer to him. And the night life of the forest was conveyed on the breeze - the sharp call of a barking-deer, the cry of a fox, the quaint *tonk-tonk* of a nightjar. There were some sounds that Suraj couldn't recognise - sounds that came from the trees, creakings and whisperings, as though the trees were coming alive, stretching their limbs in the dark, shifting a little, reflexing their fingers.

Sunder Singh stood inside the tunnel, trimming his lamp. The night sounds were familiar to him and he did not give them much thought; but something else - a padded footfall, a rustle of dry leaves - made him stand alert for a few seconds, peering into the darkness. Then, humming softly to himself, he returned to where Suraj was waiting. Another ten minutes remained for the night mail to arrive.

As Sunder Singh sat down on the cot beside Suraj, a new sound reached both of them quite distinctly - a rhythmic sawing sound, as if someone was cutting through the branch of a tree.

'What's that?' whispered Suraj.

'It's the leopard,' said Sunder Singh.

'I think it's in the tunnel.'

'The train will soon be here,' reminded Suraj.

'Yes, my friend. And if we don't drive the leopard out of the tunnel, it will be run over and killed. I can't let that happen.'

'But won't it attack us if we try to drive it out?' asked Suraj, beginning to share the watchman's concern.

'Not this leopard. It knows me well. We have seen each other many times. It has a weakness for goats and stray dogs, but it won't harm us. Even so, I'll take my axe with me. You stay here, Suraj.'

'No, I'm going with you. It'll be better than sitting here alone in the dark!'

'All right, but stay close behind me. And remember, there's nothing to fear.'

Raising his lamp high, Sunder Singh advanced into the tunnel, shouting at the top of his voice to try and scare away the animal. Suraj followed close behind, but he found he was unable to do any shouting. His throat was quite dry.

They had gone just about twenty paces into the tunnel when the light from the
lamp fell upon the leopard. It was crouching between the tracks, only fifteen feet away from them. It was not a very big leopard, but it looked lithe and sinewy. Baring its teeth and snarling, it went down on its belly, tail twitching.

Suraj and Sunder Singh both shouted together. Their voices rang through the tunnel. And the leopard, uncertain as to how many terrifying humans were there in the tunnel with him, turned swiftly and disappeared into the darkness.

To make sure that it had gone, Sunder Singh and Suraj walked the length of the tunnel. When they returned to the entrance, the rails were beginning to hum. They knew the train was coming.

Suraj put his hand to the rails and felt its tremor. He heard the distant rumble of the train. And then the engine came round the bend, hissing at them, scattering sparks into the darkness, defying the jungle as it roared through the steep sides of the cutting. It charged straight at the tunnel, and into it, thundering past Suraj like the beautiful dragon of his dreams.

And when it had gone, the silence returned and the forest seemed to breathe, to live again. Only the rails still trembled with the passing of the train.

And they trembled to the passing of the same train, almost a week later, when Suraj and his father were both travelling in it.

Suraj's father was scribbling in a notebook, doing his accounts. Suraj sat at an open window staring out at the darkness. His father was going to Delhi on a business trip and had decided to take the boy along. ('I don't know where he gets to, most of the time,' he'd complained. 'I think it's time he learnt something about my business.')

The night-mail rushed through the forest with its hundreds of passengers. Tiny flickering lights came and went, as they passed small villages on the fringe of the jungle.

Suraj heard the rumble as the train passed over a small bridge. It was too dark to see the hut near the cutting, but he knew they must be approaching the tunnel. He strained his eyes looking out into the night; and then, just as the engine let out a shrill whistle, Suraj saw the lamp.

He couldn't see Sunder Singh, but he saw the lamp, and he knew that his friend was out there.

The train went into the tunnel and out again; it left the jungle behind and thundered across the endless plains; and Suraj stared out at the darkness, thinking of the lonely cutting in the forest, and the watchman with the lamp who would always remain a firefly for those travelling thousands, as he lit up the darkness for steam-engines and leopards.
The Snake-charmer's Daughter

Many years ago a tribal village lay on the banks of a muddy steam amongst the bare, rugged foothills of the Himalayas.

Trade in the skins of lizards and snakes was good in those days, and Hiralal, a snake-charmer, made a fairly good living from his occupation. He was a well-built, handsome man, and the young village girls often cast shy, furtive looks in his direction. But Hiralal went his way without paying much attention to these distractions.
On a day when dark, threatening clouds rolled up from the east, bringing with them a strong wind, the villagers looked anxiously at the sky, for their small crops were in ears and about to mature.

Hiralal, who was wandering far up the hill, playing his pipe in the hope of attracting a snake, heard the thunder and felt the first few drops of rain. At home, the
skins lay stretched out in the courtyard, and he knew his brother was probably too drunk to think of taking them in. He began hurrying homewards, but the storm burst before he had gone half way.

Lightning sizzled across the hills, and the crash of thunder rent the air. Hiralal began to run. The stream between him and the village was already swollen, and in a short time it would be a raging torrent, impossible to cross. Tightening and girding up his loin-cloth, he entered the stream in blinding rain, and was almost across when he heard a cry for help.

It was a faint cry, barely heard above the roar of the storm; but though the water was rising every moment, Hiralal went in the direction of the cry. He found a young girl struggling for her life in the swirling water. He managed to reach her with a great effort, and a little later landed both himself and the girl just below his hut.

She had fainted; but Hiralal shouted to his brother, and between them they picked up the girl and brought her safely to their house.

When she opened her eyes, the storm had passed and the sun was shining. But the storm had left in its wake desolation and death; and the girl's home, like several others, had been levelled to the ground.

A month later the girl was married to Hiralal, the snake-charmer. After the marriage feast, a great dance was held - for the tribals; once they have offered to the dead a portion of the funeral feast, forget them quickly in the struggle for existence.

In the following year, a baby girl was born to the couple, and was named Sona, because of her honey-gold complexion. She grew up to be a beautiful girl, and offers of marriage kept coming the way of her parents.

The most tempting proposal was made by Dukha, a drunkard and a bully. Dukha was a rich man, the richest in the village, and Hiralal urged his daughter to agree to the marriage. But she would not consider Dukha or any other suitor, for her heart belonged to the slim and agile Bhim, a fisherman, in whose net she had once found herself entangled while bathing in the river. It had taken Bhim a surprisingly long time to disentangle Sona from his net - long enough for Sona to be charmed by his good looks and flashing smile.

By the time Sona had reached the marriageable age of fourteen, a succession of bad years settled on the land — the seasonal rains failed, famine stalked the village, and many died.

Making a living became difficult for Hiralal's family, because snakes and lizards were now scarce, and fewer people bought their skins. Then Hiralal's wife fell sick and died; and his brother, unable to afford a daily supply of liquor, faded away, and was found dead in the jungle one day.

Only Hiralal and his daughter were left.
Taking the few skins he had recently cured and dressed, Hiralal set out for a nearby town to try and make a sale.

While he was away, Sona wandered into the jungle and found a pet - a beautiful baby cobra. She had learnt all about snakes and their ways from her father. Carefully putting the young cobra in her waist-cloth to keep it warm, she returned home.

Hiralal had sold a couple of skins, and they managed to fill their stomachs for a few weeks; but a day came when all their money was finished. They still had their brass utensils left, and these were mortgaged to Dukha, who paid a price far below their worth.

'I would give you more,' he said, 'if only Sona were betrothed to me.'

And then came a day when there was nothing left to mortgage. They were faced with starvation. Hiralal begged his daughter to agree to marrying Dukha, but the girl was stubborn.

According to tribal custom, the final choice of a husband lay entirely with her.

Meanwhile, Bhim, the fisherman had disappeared without warning, to try his luck with the net in the glacier-fed streams further north. Sona was sad and lonely. Every morning she went down to the stream, but there was no sign of the fisherman.

Her father kept urging her to marry Dukha, who had now promised to advance Hiralal a hundred rupees and return the mortgaged articles as soon as the engagement was made binding. Sona was in despair.

Bhim, the one man whom she admired, seemed to have deserted her in the hour of her greatest need. Finally, weakened by her father's constant pleading, she agreed to the engagement. Dukha was overjoyed and went about the village boasting of his conquest.

One evening, as Sona was feeding her pet snake with some goat's milk given to her by a neighbour, a shadow fell across the doorstep. It was Bhim. She clung to the man she loved and poured out her woes; but he was helpless in the matter, because by the rules of the tribe no man could interfere with a marriage once the girl had given her consent.

Bhim tried to console her, and told her of his visit to a distant city where people were ready to pay money to watch a snake respond to the music of the snake-charmer's pipe: perhaps Hiralal could take to training the snakes he caught, instead of skinning them. But all this was of no consolation to the heartbroken girl.

And then, on the day before the marriage, Dukha, blustering and bragging, entered the house and seized the girl. He was drunk and could contain himself no longer. But he was unaware of the pet snake coiled round Sona's neck. As he caught the girl by the shoulders, a hooded coil darted out towards him and tapped him just once on the wrist. Two small punctures appeared on the man's hand.
With a cry of terror, Dukha staggered backwards. And as several people rushed into the room, the braggart sunk slowly to the floor, his eyes bulging, his arms and legs stretching wide. Dukha was dead.

The news of better prospects in the distant city filled many villagers with renewed hope, and on a cold winter morning a small procession moved southwards. It was headed by Bhim the fisherman, and close behind him came his wife Sona, her beloved cobra coiled tenderly around her neck.
The Wild Fruit

It was a long walk to school. Down the hill, through the rhododendron trees, across a small stream, around a bare, brown hill, and then through the narrow little bazaar, past fruit stalls piled high with oranges, guavas, bananas, and apples.

The boy's gaze often lingered on those heaps of golden oranges - oranges grown in the plains, now challenging the pale winter sunshine in the hills. His nose twitched at the sharp smell of melons in summer; his fingers would sometimes touch for a moment the soft down on the skin of a peach. But these were forbidden fruit. The boy hadn't the money for them.

He took one meal at seven in the morning when he left home; another at seven in the evening when he returned from school. There were times - especially when he was at school, and his teacher droned on and on, lecturing on honesty, courage, duty, and self-sacrifice -when he felt very hungry; but on the way to school, or on the way home, there was nearly always the prospect of some wild fruit.

The boy's name was Vijay, and he belonged to a village near the Mussoorie. His parents tilled a few narrow terraces on the hill slopes. They grew potatoes, onions, barley, maize; barely enough to feed themselves. When greens were scarce, they boiled the tops of the stinging-nettle and made them into a dish resembling spinach.

Vijay's parents realised the importance of sending him to school, and it didn't cost them much, except for the books. But it was all of four miles to the town, and a long walk makes a boy hungry.

But there was nearly always the wild fruit. The purple berries of the thorny bilberry bushes, ripening in May and June. Wild strawberries, growing in shady places like spots of blood on the deep green monsoon grass. Small, sour cherries, and tough medlars. Vijay's strong teeth and probing tongue extracted whatever tang or sweetness lay hidden in them. And in March there were the rhododendron flowers.

His mother made them into jam. But Vijay liked them as they were. He placed the petals on his tongue and chewed them till the sweet juice trickled down his throat. But in November, there was no wild fruit. Only acorns on the oak trees, and they were bitter, fit only for the monkeys.

He walked through the bazaar, barefoot, strong in the legs. He looked a healthy boy, until you came up close and saw the patches on his skin and the dullness in his
He passed the fruit stalls, wondering who ate all that fruit, and what happened to the fruit that went bad; he passed the sweet shop, where hot, newly-fried *jelabies* lay protected like twisted orange jewels in a glass case, and where a fat, oily man raised a knife and plunged it deep into a thick slab of rich amber-coloured *halwa*.

The saliva built up in Vijay's mouth; there was a dull ache in his stomach. But his eyes gave away nothing of the sharp pangs that he felt.

And now, a confectioner's shop. Glass jars filled with chocolates, peppermints, toffees - sweets he didn't know the names of, English sweets - wrapped up in bits of coloured paper.

A boy had just bought a bag of sweets. He had one in his mouth. He was a well-dressed boy; coins jingled in his pocket. The sweet moved from one cheek to the other. He bit deep into it, and Vijay heard the crunch and looked up. The boy smiled at Vijay, but moved away.

They met again, further along the road, once again the boy smiled, even looked as though he was about to offer Vijay a sweet; but this time, Vijay shyly looked away. He did not want it to appear that he had noticed the sweets, or that he hungered for one.

But he kept meeting the boy, who always managed to reappear at some corner, sucking a sweet, moving it about in his mouth, letting it show between his wet lips - a sticky green thing, temptingly, lusciously beautiful.

The bag of sweets was nearly empty.

Reluctantly, Vijay decided that he must overtake the boy, forget all about the sweets, and hurry home. Otherwise, he would be tempted to grab the bag and run!

And then, he saw the boy leave the bag on a bench, look at him once, and smile - smile shyly and invitingly - before moving away.

Was the bag empty? Vijay wondered with mounting excitement. It couldn't be, or it would have been blown away almost immediately. Obviously, there were still a few sweets in it. The boy had disappeared. He had gone for his tea, and Vijay could have the rest of the sweets.

Vijay took the bag and jammed it into a pocket of his shirt. Then he hurried homewards. It was getting late, and he wanted to be home before dark.

As soon as he was out of the town, he opened the bag and shook the sweets out. Their red wrappers glowed like rubies in the palm of his hand.

Carefully, he undid a wrapper.

There was no sweet inside, only a smooth, round stone.

Vijay found stones in all the wrappers. In his mind's eye, Vijay saw the smiling face of the boy in the bazaar: a boy who smiled sweetly but exchanged stones for sweets.

Forcing back angry tears, Vijay flung the stones down the hillside. Then he
shouldered his bag of books and began the long walk home.

There were patches of snow on the ground. The grass was a dirty brown, the bushes were bare.

There is no wild fruit in November.
Stories Short and Sweet by Ruskin Bond is a collection of his choicest short stories capturing the myriad facets of life in the hills. Humour, nostalgia, love, friendship, trust and betrayal – Bond captures every mood that makes childhood worth remembering.

From the nostalgia of country life revisited in When the Tress Walked, to the beautiful bond of friendship formed between an old widow and a young boy owing to their shared love of flowers in A Bouquet of Love, from a mischievous ghost in Pret in the House to a little boy craving for sweets in The Wild Fruit – this collection encapsulates the magic of extraordinary emotions seen in ordinary lives.

Every story is delicately woven into a memorable vignette set in the backdrop of the countryside or the middle class urban life. The many shades of childhood and a rich cast of characters make it a fascinating read, especially for young readers.

Ruskin Bond, well-known as one of India’s best-loved and most prolific writers, has been writing novels, poetry, essays, and short stories for almost half a century now. Apart from this, over the years he has expertly compiled and edited a number of anthologies. A winner of many awards for his outstanding literary contribution, he has also been awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993 (for English writing in India) and the Padma Shri in 1999. Several of his stories, including The Blue Umbrella, have been made into memorable films.

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Cover design: sonalilal@gmail.com