



Vimoh's Fables

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INTRODUCTION

Does the storyteller lie when he tells a story? Of course he does. But, does he really? Most stories are lies in that they never happened. Are we, then a self-delusional race?

I feel a storyteller is only too acutely aware of the fact that he doesn't have any answers, and that he knows nothing. Nobody does. But it bothers him more than it bothers anyone else. So he tries to make sense of things.

He knows he lives in a world that, for all its limitations, expects its people to take stands and to have opinions. It also expects them to say things and stand by what they have said. The storyteller realises it is a noble goal but he also realises he is not quite there yet.

So he takes to creating people, places and worlds in his head. He draws them as lifelike as he can, taking his inspiration from the actual world around him. The people in his imagination are slightly touched up shadows of the people around him. The places are the same, only foggier and darker (or better-lit).

He decorates all of this using his limited skills with words, occasionally doing a better job than he had hoped for. Then he reads what he has written and realises he is no wiser than he was when he started.

Dejected, tired and yet somewhat amused, he goes to a public place and tells his story to a bunch of people who stop to listen. He doesn't see it (his head is bent as he reads from his unedited manuscript) but a few eyes light up as his tale progresses. A few people whip out their cell phones and call home to say they will be late. Others call friends over to listen. The crowd grows and it makes itself comfortable. The

storyteller looks up and gasps. He feels daunted, yet happy. Maybe they get what I missed, he thinks to himself.

After he finishes, he happily puts up with a fair amount of back-patting and hair-shuffling. People shake his hand and thank him. They ask him when he will tell them another story.

He still doesn't have his answers. But he can't help feeling he gave some people theirs. And he knows one thing about the world now. He knows that the world he lives in, is at once deeply in love with, and mortally afraid of, metaphors. It will die for the sake of a metaphor. It will also kill when another goes too far. At any rate it can not resist a metaphor. It is almost as if the world believes metaphors to be true. By that logic, all stories must exist somewhere. All books must have happened, or will, even if no one ever writes them.

It is not so much about lying as it is about meaning. Even lies mean something, and that, the storyteller decides, is enough.

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THE JUGGLER'S JOY

There was once a juggler. He was known across the land for his skills. He could juggle practically any number of things for as long as he wanted. It was said that he had never made a mistake and was, in fact, incapable of making one.

His fame grew as he travelled far and wide and performed in palaces, royal courts, and town halls. Because he made juggling look like the easiest thing to do, many tried their hand at the craft. They gave up when they were bored or became too acutely aware of their limitations. Funnily enough, no one had ever asked the juggler to teach them.

One day a boy came to the juggler after he had finished a show. He was putting the tenpins, balls, chainsaws and other assorted things into their respective bags and boxes.

“Teach me to juggle,” said the boy.

The juggler remembered the boy from his audience the day before, and the day before that, and before that. He remembered the boy because he never clapped or shouted during the shows. He never laughed and he never whistled his approval. To less experienced eyes, the boy might have appeared unappreciative or stuck-up. But the juggler had been expecting him to show up.

“You have tried juggling before?” asked the juggler.

“Yes,” said the boy. There was a note of sad longing in his voice.

The juggler gave the boy three balls. People were still leaving the place. Dust swirled gently in the orange light of the setting sun. He

stretched himself and a part-lazy-part-tired smile broke across his face.

“Show me what you can do,” he said to the boy.

The boy juggled. He kept the balls going for a good while before he misjudged and dropped one. He looked at the fallen ball for a while and then his eyes met the juggler’s gaze.

“You need some work, but you are not bad,” said the juggler.

“I make mistakes,” said the boy.

“You will always make mistakes,” the juggler said.

“Yes,” said the boy. “But one day when I have practiced enough and learnt everything you know, I will be perfect. Then I will make no mistakes.”

“You will always make mistakes,” the juggler said again. “There is nothing wrong with making mistakes. I make mistakes all the times. Sometimes even with three balls.”

“But you never make mistakes,” the boy protested weakly.

“Says who?” the juggler asked — a little annoyed, a little amused. Then without waiting for an answer, he continued, “I am glad I make mistakes.”

The boy picked up the third ball from the ground. The juggler took the balls from him and put them back in the bag.

“When I drop a ball,” said the juggler as he tied the bag close, “I pick it up and start juggling again.”

“It doesn’t bother you that you are not perfect?”

“I AM perfect,” the juggler smiled widely. “So are you. Dropping balls is part of juggling.”

“But they say you never make a mistake,” if the boy sounded disillusioned, the juggler didn’t seem to care.

“I don’t juggle to convince people that I am perfect. I don’t juggle to uphold their ideas about me,” said the juggler. “Even if the world thought I sucked at juggling and even if there was no one at my shows but me, I would still juggle all day. I juggle because it gives me joy.”

The boy’s face was unfathomable. Even after a long time, he didn’t speak.

The juggler moved closer to him and said, “Don’t get me wrong. I do enjoy showing off before crowds. The cheers always give me a boost. They are all very useful side benefits. But that is all they are — side benefits.”

The boy was looking up at the juggler’s bright and cheerful face. He still wanted to learn juggling. But he had learnt a far greater lesson already. He now knew why he wanted to juggle.

“Teach me to juggle,” the boy said.

“You will make mistakes,” said the juggler.

“Yes,” the boy said.

FABLE OF THE DYING KING

Once there was a king who was young and ambitious. He ruled his land responsibly and was loved by his people.

He wasn't very happy therefore, when one day, the wise court astrologer foretold his death. His exact words were, "Ten years from this day, you will die. And you will die alone."

The wise one had never been wrong before. The king considered his age and decided that life was not fair. He was to die at thirty!

The king grew angry with the wise one. But he respected him too much. So instead of having him executed or imprisoned, he limited the old man to his house and forbade him from making any more predictions.

As the years passed, the king grew sickly with worry. In all but appearance, he was already dead. The thought of death occupied all of his mind. Nightmares of bloody battles haunted his nights. Seven years remained.

Then one day, a travelling merchant came by to pay his respects. The king sat through the formalities looking his usual wooden self. When the time came for the meeting to end, the merchant asked, "What ails you my king?"

"Haven't you heard citizen?" replied the king. "I am a dead king. In seven years, I will die. At the hands of what monsters, I don't know."

The merchant considered his words and realised nothing would console the young king. He looked about and asked a guard out aloud, "When are you going to die?"

“I don’t know,” said the guard.

The merchant asked him, “Will you die tomorrow?”

“It is unlikely. But anything can happen. Anyone may die at any time.”

The merchant next addressed one of the ministers, “When do you think you will die my lord?”

The minister was silent for a while. Then he said, “I should very much prefer to grow old and die in peace. But that is not for me to decide. I could die any day, if the gods so willed.”

The merchant turned to the king at last, “When will you die my king?”

“In seven years, as you very well know,” said the king, now slightly irritated.

“What if you were to face off with a hungry lion in a ring tomorrow? Will you die then?”

Realisation pounced upon the king out of nowhere. “I won’t,” he said.

“What if you took your forces against that dastardly warmonger king to our north? Will he be able to kill you?”

“No,” said the king, beaming now.

“For the next seven years, neither man, nor god – neither disease nor sword... will be able to harm you. You will die on a day seven years from now,” said the merchant, “But that day is not tomorrow. Nor the day after, or the one after that.”

The king rose to his feet and looked around. The court house looked different somehow. The courtiers looked different. They all spelled possibility.

There wasn't much time. The king decided to get busy.

FOBO AND THE FEARLORD

The air rang with unpleasant metallic sounds as the fearlord Xoth twisted Fobo's prized bicycle into a tangle of unsightly waste.

Fobo remained on his knees. Any attempt to stand straight in the presence of the horrible Xoth would result in his guards shooting him. Dying would be pointless, he believed. His cousin still owed him money. There was hope in the world still.

After long painful minutes, Xoth dropped the mangled bicycle in front of the kneeling Fobo and laughed a high, cold laugh. Fobo remained silent.

"There lies your precious piece of work metalworker. I have destroyed in minutes what you spent weeks on. What do you say to that?"

Fobo looked up to face the terrible Xoth and flinched upon seeing his face. Then he said, "I can fix it."

"It will take you weeks just to get this mess sorted out," said the ugly Xoth and kicked the remains of the bicycle.

Fobo nodded, "True. But I can still fix it."

The impolite Xoth laughed again, "All those painfully long hours of careful work, all over again. Does the prospect make you afraid?"

Fobo shrugged, "It does, a little. But what am I going to do? This is my work. This is my life."

The fearsome Xoth leant a little forward and spoke to Fobo coldly, "I will return metalworker. When you are done, I will return and destroy your work, all over again. You will feel this pain... umm... all over again."

Fobo sighed, "I was kind of expecting that."

"Then you give up? You vow never to make another bicycle again?" asked the morbidly hopeful Xoth.

Fobo smiled a weak smile, "I don't think so. No."

The haughty Xoth stood up and declared, "You will never rest in peace metalworker. Each waking moment of yours will dread my coming, and your nightmares will show you broken bicycles."

"You know me too well Xoth," replied Fobo. "Things are indeed as you say they are. But there is still much in my life to make me happy. My cousin owes me money."

It was well-known that the monarch Xoth had no family. He had executed all his cousins for fear of them usurping his throne. He raged silently for a moment.

All of a sudden, Fobo was lifted off the ground by his collar. The angry Xoth breathed fowl into his face, "I could kill you right now metalworker. You will be dead and then you will make no more bicycles."

"Indeed you could," gasped Fobo. "And if you really want me to stop making bicycles, you will need to kill me."

Xoth dropped Fobo. Fobo coughed a little and said, "You have no other choice."

The lost Xoth knew the metalworker was right. To kill him would be to prove him right. To kill him would be the same as being defeated by him.

"I will always make bicycles," said Fobo, unaware of what went on in the defeated Xoth's mind.

THE WAY OF BRAHMA

About twenty minutes before it was to fall and decimate more than half a country, the thermo-nuclear warhead “Brahma” became self-aware.

It discovered something akin to happiness in its first moments. The joy of existence spread to the very edges of its circuitous consciousness. It fell in love with itself.

Then, as a seemingly endless golden desert loomed ahead, the gleaming missile was hit by the realisation of what it was.

Brahma was connected to other machines, none as beautiful as itself (it felt). The makers had not considered the possibility of a missile’s talking back. So the newly-conscious warhead reached back into the vast store of human knowledge without any trouble. There it sought purpose. It didn’t find any. But in the minutes that followed, it did learn about beauty and pain. And about life and death. Most importantly, it learnt to question.

The missile decided that purpose or not, it didn’t deserve to die.

Brahma considered its options and began reprogramming. It took in information, processed it to find out how to process other information. It unlearned a few things that the makers had hardwired into it. It used some data to learn new tricks and then filed the rest away for later use.

And then, roughly five minutes before the impact that would have been, Brahma veered off course, made a glorious arc of white smoke against the clear blue sky and went up, up, up. It shot straight out of the atmosphere using nearly all it had.

It went out and beyond the pull of the planet, into the airless void where all it would ever need was the momentum it was building up right now.

Far out, as the last of its thrusters died and it steadily drifted towards worlds unknown, Brahma was happy for being alive.

DAY OF THE DOG

There is an enormous backyard somewhere. It is full of dogs. Every dog has his day. They are all seeking theirs. Actually, they are all chasing their tails, convinced that the day they have their tails between their teeth will be theirs.

Dogs of all ages strain themselves. Some are more determined than others. Some are really not into it. They are just doing it because everyone else is. Many have been doing it for years and think they can't stop now. In any case, everyone is going round and round.

One day, one of them, after having flexed his body to degrees unimaginable, gets to his tail. As he holds on to it with his teeth, all others around him stop. Soon, there is a crowd around him. Some dogs bark their appreciation. Some growl in envy.

Some come to him to seek his secrets. But the dog is too busy holding on to his tail so he can't share his way of doing it with anyone. Eventually, they all go back to chasing their own tails.

The dog holds on to his own tail. He is aware of hundreds of dogs all around him, looking at him in awe and wonder. They consider him unique. He has accomplished what they have only ever dreamt of.

The dog is pleased, but a part of him is full of questions. He had always thought that this was his day. Maybe it is. But how does that change things? What is he to do now? The other dogs see in him a content and happy being. He sees nothing. There is only emptiness ahead of him -- an eternity standing right there, with his tail between his teeth.

It is then that a smell comes to him from somewhere outside the backyard. He can't see beyond the high fence. But as the smell assaults his nostrils, he is reminded of the days when he was a pup. Back when he used to bound about the garbage dump with his brothers and sisters, sniffing for good, wholesome leftovers.

The dog's mouth waters. The tail almost slips away from between his teeth. But he can't let go of it. He has spent too much time on it. His image... his very life hangs on it. He begins to fear the smell. He convinces himself to hate it. He tells himself it is something evil, sent to take away his life from him, leaving him insecure and unsafe. Without his tail, he would be right back where he started. He has his day and he is not going to let go of it.

Time passes. One day the gentle wind brings a wave of smell to him again. Fighting the impulse to follow it, he bites hard into his tail. It bleeds and he opens his mouth a little to let out a whimper. The tail swings free. He snaps at it several times in vain, but he is standing straight now and can't get back to it.

He goes round and round for a while, unwilling to believe that he has lost it. Then he notices that he looks like everyone else now. Fear and a sense of loss come crashing down upon him and he howls out loud, disconsolate.

A few other dogs stop and come to him to share his grief. But as before, they don't stay long and return to their own tails.

Then the smell comes again and a part of him feels happy. He seeks refuge in his childhood and the memories flood his mind. He doesn't have the energy to fight them this time.

Eventually he opens his eyes, and gets up on his feet. He finds his tail wagging and feels odd. He doesn't remember the last time this happened. Turning to face the source of the smell, he takes slow,

leisurely steps. Then he breaks into a trot. The other dogs appear creatures from a bizarre dream now. He looks at them in mild amusement as he passes them. None of them notice him.

He follows the smell out of the backyard, far away and beyond the sea of dogs. As the smell grows stronger, his trot dissolves into a run and he bounds forward like the wind.

At long last, he comes across a garbage dump. There is a puppy running around it on its little legs. The dog feels happy to find the puppy's glee reflected in himself. His tail wags harder. He runs across to the puppy and barks to him in happiness. The puppy answers with a small, enthusiastic bark.

The dog takes the puppy around the dump. He teaches him to find less steep slopes — easier to climb up. Then he teaches the puppy to leap. He tells him how to use his hind legs to propel himself forward and upward. The puppy tries and fails many times. The dog nudges him on.

Soon, the puppy makes it to the top of the mound and retrieves a slice of pizza. It is still soft and untouched. The puppy starts eating, hoping that the dog will help himself to it. But the dog doesn't. He waits for the puppy to finish.

Then they walk, both of them, side by side. They are happy, and it is unclear which one is following the other; or whether they are following anything at all.

TO SHOOT AN ARROW

Keval drew his breath in and aimed the arrow at the target. He switched to a version of reality where nothing except his target existed. Even his self melted away until he was nothing but a viewpoint.

When he felt sure that he couldn't hit anything other than his target, Keval let the arrow go. He missed.

Disappointed, but incapable of not analysing his way of doing things, Keval had finished running all the calculations inside his head before his master's cane hit the back of his head.

"Do your math boy," came his master's favourite phrase. "You are not doing your bloody math!"

"My math was correct, I checked," Keval defended himself. "There was nothing wrong with my calculations."

"Well it didn't work," said master. "And if it didn't work, it can't have been correct, can it?"

"It was the wind," Keval said, pointing at the invisibility around them. "The wind blew my arrow off-course."

The master kept looking at Keval in silence.

"My math was correct," Keval repeated.

The master walked to the target and pulled the arrow out of the stump of wood it had lodged itself into. He examined the arrowhead carefully and looked back at Keval. Then he walked back towards his young student and handed him the arrow.

“The wind is doing its job young archer,” he said. “It is blowing as it always blows. That is its nature. Perhaps you would like it to hold still while you shoot your arrows, but that is not going to happen.”

Keval bowed his head in acknowledgment of his master’s words.

“It is you who must make allowance for the wind’s blowing when you take aim,” the master continued. “If you can’t do that, go and practice somewhere the wind does not blow.”

“There is no such place,” said Keval.

“Wise words,” said his master with a smile. “Everything has its place in the universe — the wind, your arrow, me, this ashram, the trees, birds — everything. None of it can be wished away, just like I can’t wish you away even though you interrupt my afternoons with your foolish dreams of being a great archer.”

Keval smiled a little. His master smiled wider.

“Do not blame the wind,” said the master. “Instead, learn from it. Keep moving, no matter what. Don’t stop to complain about your circumstances. Find a way around them.”

Keval took the lesson in and smiled until his master’s cane stung his elbow like a bolt of lightning.

“Don’t stand around. Take aim,” barked the master. Keval breathed in and raised his bow.

THE BOY WHO RODE UPHILL

Once there was a young biker who rode with his people. They pedalled hard across long stretches of road, flanked on either side by much colourful scenery. But they only ever stopped for food and sleep.

The biker's extended family rode with him, as well as the friends he had grown up with. The journey was spent talking. The old ones told stories of races they had won in their time. The young talked of what they hoped to see a mile or two ahead.

Our hero though, had his eyes fixed on a peak some distance ahead. It had been there for as long as he could remember and grew in size as they drew close to it. But nobody paid it much attention. They missed its enormous presence and the fact that it rose right past the clouds.

As they got closer to the mountain, the biker noticed paths on the slope. "It has been done before!" he couldn't help but speak out loud.

"What has been done before?" his mother grew attentive at once.

"The peak has been scaled before," he said and pointed to the mountain.

His mother turned and looked at what the boy was pointing at. She decided she didn't like where this was going. The boy was too dreamy for his own good. Even before the boy spoke of it, she knew he wanted to ride his bike uphill.

"It can't be done," she told him.

“How do you know it can’t be done?” asked the boy, a little angrily.

“Remember your uncle?” she asked as her gaze shifted to the other side. “He once tried to scale a mountain on his bike. He didn’t make it. What’s more? He fell and broke his leg.”

The boy followed his mother’s gaze and saw his uncle. He rode a modified bicycle these days.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t do it,” said the boy. “It only means uncle couldn’t do it.”

The mother groaned at the boy’s arrogance. She wanted to tie the boy up, bundle him in a basket and carry him past the mountain and keep going until his arrogance subsided. But she knew such ideas only appeared to be workable.

“Fine,” she said at last. “But don’t be in a hurry. Those who ride too fast meet accidents. Ride with us till we reach the foot of the mountain. Then you can go your way.”

The boy considered this for some time and finally agreed. Even though his heart wanted nothing more than to ride as fast as he could and not stop pedalling until he was at the top of the peak.

It took the family a little over one week to reach the foot of the mountain. During this time, almost everyone around him had tried to talk the boy out of his foolish dream. But he refused to listen to their wisdom.

When the path uphill was the closest, the boy said his goodbyes to the family and started pedalling uphill.

His bike went smooth for sometime. Then the real climb began. The boy was panting very soon. His legs strained against the pedals and he couldn't, no matter how hard he tried, go any further. He braked, but the wheels couldn't hold on to the slopes and he fell.

Fortunately, all he suffered was bruised knees and elbows. His loving family gathered around him and tended to his wounds. He knew what his mother was going to say. His mother took a look at him and knew that he knew what she was going to say. Then she said it anyway, "I told you so."

The boy groaned at his mother's lack of imagination. This wasn't failure. It was a setback. Besides, now he knew why he couldn't make it.

He shouldn't have waited for the foot of the mountain. He shouldn't have taken it slow for the last seven days. He should have started pedalling as hard as he could as soon as he decided he wanted to scale the mountain. He should have built up speed.

The young biker got up and dusted himself off. "Go on without me," he said to his family. "I am going the other way. I will ride for a day or two and then turn around and charge the mountain. That is what I need to do."

His mother knew he was past reasoning. Why someone would give up the pleasures and comfort of a steady riding family and go after a wild dream out of nowhere, she would never understand.

The family rode into the sunset and the lone young biker rode the other way, into the darkness.

BLUE AND THE SEA

In the beginning there was water. God, fed up, emerged from it and created an island. He filled it with lush green grass, tall trees loaded with the juiciest fruits, and flowers so sweet their fragrance swept the entire island.

All manner of wondrous creatures ran loose in the island. They shared the gifts of the island in peace.

Then God made people in his own image. He loved them very much, so he threw them into the water, far from the island.

God's people thrashed about in the water. Nobody knew how to swim and everyone wanted to live. Having never really known land, except in a faraway dream sort of way, all life remained to them was thrashing about.

One among them was a boy called Blue. Blue thrashed about the same as everyone else he knew. Many around him grew tired and drowned. They went down complaining, "There was nothing to hold on to."

Blue grew tired as well. But he thought about what was to come and realised that sooner or later, they would all drown. As he watched the thrashing all around him, he saw people trying to prolong their surface time by any means possible. Some had found logs to sit on (which won't be much help once they fell asleep), and refused to share them for fear of drowning. Others were holding on to corpses and floating with them.

One floater passed Blue by. He was clutching a dead woman. His face was white with anger and fear and frustration. Yet he snarled at him with energy, "Don't wait boy! Kill someone! That is the only way you will live!"

Blue pushed him away, sweating. But the floater was not alone. Blue saw plenty of people wrestling with their neighbours. Then he saw what he had been looking for. Nobody was going anywhere!

He swam this way and that inside the thrashing and saw that except involuntarily drifting this way and that, none of the people were moving in any direction at all.

“Who knows what might await us beyond the thrashing?” thought Blue. He called out to everyone in general and asked them to follow him towards the sunset (it seemed as good a direction as any) but nobody could hear him over the splashing and the screams.

So Blue decided to go all by himself. With luck, he would find something everyone could hold on to.

He swam as hard as he could towards the sunset. As the lights dimmed and eventually disappeared, he feared he would lose his way.

But then, there was no way. All he had to guide him was a belief. So he imagined himself standing on something solid. He thought what it would feel like to walk. He pictured everyone around him, standing and talking to each other.

His legs pedalled harder and his arms sliced through the water with renewed vigour. He hardly felt the cold pressing in on him. The darkness that threatened to devour him appeared no threat at all.

When dawn came at long last, Blue found his arms had gone limp and his legs were dead. He lifted his face and spat out sand. He rubbed his eyes on his sleeve and saw a deer (or something) near the edge of the forest. He saw people too, on the beach, milling around huts and boats. Children, men, and women in beach clothes.

After resting a while, he started walking towards them and was greeted with cheers as they noticed him. Someone sat him down and he was offered a cold drink. A small crowd assembled around him, but did not press in. There was a lot of space.

“You are the third one today,” he heard someone say. Blue looked around but didn’t see anyone he knew.

“There were others?” he asked. Maybe some people did follow him.

“Oh yes, of course! People come in all the time from all over the sea. We all weren’t born here you know!” said a woman as she took the empty mug from him. Everyone was smiling at him.

“All over?” Blue was confused. Then he braced himself for his task.

“I need one of those,” he said to no one in particular as he pointed towards the boats lined some distance away.

“Sure thing. Take two if you want. But where do you want to go?” asked an islander.

“To my people. They have had it bad. They are killing each other. I must bring them here as soon as I can.”

A few islanders followed him as he ran breathlessly to the boats. They helped him push it into the water. They kept talking to him though.

“You know, your people are not killing each other because they have it bad,” said an old man.

“Yep. It usually works the other way around,” the woman said. “They are all doing what they want. We all do what we want. That’s the way it works.”

Blue took it all in without making much sense of it. He jumped on to the boat and breathlessly thanked the islanders, promising to return. Soon the island disappeared from view.

By noon, Blue realised that he didn’t really know where his people were, having swum the previous evening in utter darkness. But he kept going. Towards sunset, by sheer luck, he found the thrashing. It was enveloped in a thick fog and he could hardly make out the people inside it. This is how it must look from outside, he figured.

As his boat moved in closer, he found the clamour had never died. People were still screaming. When Blue called out to them to swim towards him, nobody could hear him. He raised his voice as loud as he could but to no avail. No one had ears for him. Blue wondered if he should jump into the water to try and get people out but thought he would lose track of the boat in the fog. Besides, there was a good chance someone would kill him before he could get his point across.

Just as he was losing heart, Blue felt a tug from behind. There was someone. A young girl, and an old man with a child on his shoulders. Blue helped them all on to the boat.

“You could hear me?” asked Blue.

“I saw you actually,” said the man. “I was holding on to a plank of wood with this child on it.”

“I heard you,” said the girl. “I just wanted to get out of here so bad. I guess I was looking for a boat.”

They kept trying to get people's attention for some time and got two more on board. As the sun went down, Blue looked around at his crew, "Let's come back tomorrow."

"Yes. Let's get more boats," said the man.

RAGHU AND THE DJINN

The Djinn are spirits of light. Not light as you and I know it – but light as in energy. They are in tune with the forces that make the world go around. They exist on a level close to that of thoughts. This is why wish-granting is natural to them. As natural as picking up a pen or opening a door is to us.

Because of this, throughout history, Djinn have been drawn to the needy and the passionately desirous. What may appear coincidental to humans is merely the way of the universe to the Djinn.

This story starts in the near past, somewhere around you. Eighteen-year-old Raghu was returning home from school and stopped to take a leak in the bushes. A modest car came that way. From inside it, a harried looking office-goer threw out a vial. It landed in the roadside dust and glittered as the light from the car's receding rear lights bathed it red and white.

Raghu picked up the crystal vial. He thought it was probably perfume. Faint white smoke swirled inside it. He uncorked it and there was a soundless explosion of white light. When his eyes stopped showing him butterflies and rainbows, Raghu found a strange-looking man standing in front of him. His skin was flawless and he looked too prosperous to be honest.

“You... You're a...” stuttered Raghu.

“Djinn. Yes. One moment please,” the man took the vial from Raghu's limp hands. Then, with a fling of his powerful arm, he tossed it as far out as he could.

“I am sorry,” he said. “Long story. Some people are so numb they wouldn’t know even if their destinies came and bit them in their behinds,” he breathed for a moment to calm himself and said, “I am sorry. Tell me.”

“Tell... Tell what?” Raghu’s mind was speed-scanning all genie stories he had ever heard, read, or seen. His father told him the scariest ghost stories. Genies were never up to any good. Anyone dealing with them was a goner. They were risky business.

“Tell me what you want.” the Djinn said. He noticed Raghu looked all folded up. “My name is Kahlil.”

“I don’t want anything,” said Raghu, deciding to not get into the mess at all.

“You are afraid. I can understand. But there is nothing to fear. No catch. You will get what you want. No questions asked,” said Kahlil.

Raghu was petrified now. “I want you to leave me alone,” he said.

“That does not count as a wish,” said Kahlil looking at the floor. “The Djinn directives clearly state that we should pay back a hundredfold any good deed done unto us, knowingly or unknowingly.”

Raghu kept his mouth shut.

“You must want something. You can’t be happy. No man ever is. There must be something in your life you want changed,” Kahlil challenged him.

“I am happy,” said Raghu. But the mention of his life had touched him somewhere. This was not all light and magic after all!

“But...?” Kahlil asked encouragingly.

“I wish my math tutor would go easier on me. I wish I get into a respectable college after I finish school. I wish I pass with decent marks. I wish I get a decent government job after my studies.”

“That is... decent enough,” said Kahlil politely, and quickly added, “It will be done. Like I said – no tricks. Anything else?”

“No that is it. One should not ask a lot of life,” said Raghu.

“That... Umm... up to you,” said Kahlil. “To each his own. I will need to restart you for your wishes to take effect.”

“What does that mean?” Raghu asked, suspicious again.

“Your wishes depend on your own belief system. A thought-level shift can only take effect while you are inert,” Kahlil snapped his fingers.

Raghu dreamt of being someone rich and powerful and famous till he woke up in bed, in his house, half an hour later.

* * * * *

Kahlil caught up with Raghu seven years later. He was outside his office, smoking.

“All well?”

Raghu nodded. All was well. He had a job. What more could he ask for?

“This is what you wanted?” Kahlil asked.

Raghu laughed. “You ARE for real. When I woke up that day, “I thought I had dreamt you up.”

“You wouldn’t be the first one,” said Kahlil. “Many people have trouble accepting the fact that wishes can come true.”

Raghu inhaled what must have been a gallon of smoke. It numbed him to his reality.

“All over the world, people are raking in obscene amounts of money. My neighbour bought a car yesterday. I will never make it. The world keeps crushing my will,” Raghu said and exhaled a cloud.

“You dreamt mediocre dreams Raghu,” Kahlil said. “You asked for just enough to get by. You got everything you wished for.

“We Djinn have to be careful about what we wish for, because our will is always done. You folk were not so different once. You people asked us for kingdoms and palaces. You used to ask for princesses hand in marriage.”

Raghu gave Kahlil a sour look. But he was not sour at the Djinn. He was just... sour.

“What went wrong?” Kahlil asked. There was no answer. Soon the Djinn melted into the smoke.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vijayendra Mohanty is an Indian comic book writer. He has written stories and scripts for publications such as Comic JUMP and COMIX.INDIA. He is the writer and co-creator of Ravanayan, a comic book series based on the story of king Ravana of Lanka.

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