



INSIDE STORIES

Offline Story for Week 1

What Happens When You Really Listen

(Adapted from a story collected by A.K.Ramanujan in Folktales from India, Penguin Books)

From young to old, we all love a good story...

Except for one man, who - so it seemed to the community where he lived - loved nothing and no one at all. Some even called him a sluggard, because he never came out of his house, not even to the knoll where the entertainers would come every so often to share their art.

From all over India these gifted souls would come to that little hillock at the feet of the Himalayas and, standing within the low, broken walls of an ancient building, they would dance or sing or recite the epic poems of the land. Not for royalty would they perform, nor for the higher casts, neither for scholars or holy men. They came to offer their talents to the people. And when they came to the knoll, as they had done for longer than anyone could remember, everyone, from all the villages nearby would come to lose themselves in what was on offer. Except that one man.

One day a storyteller came to tell tales from the Ramayana, that grand Indian saga, and, after the first night of telling, the man's wife and daughter came home and begged the man to go to the knoll the following evening to hear the storyteller.

"All the others you have missed, and I said nothing," pressed the wife, "But this man is a magician with words, when you hear him speak you will never be the same again."

But the man refused. When he had come to this village, fleeing from horrors far away, he withdrew more and more from the outside world, not knowing why but finding solace only in solitude and, most often, in sleep. He was always safe when he slept.

His wife and daughter were determined though and continued to cajole him. It was to no effect until the wife pulled out her last trick. It was low but it was all she could do to convince her

husband to join them on the knoll for the next telling: she said that if he did not come then she would not cook for him.

Now the man, despite what others in the village said about him, was not a sluggard. He helped around the house more than most men, in fact, but cooking was simply not something men were allowed to do in that part of the land.

So in the morning when the wife, and indeed the daughter too, showed just how serious they were by not cooking anything for the man, he tried to cook some daal - lentils - for himself. And then tried to eat them, making an effort to crunch the waxy pellets between his teeth because he had not nearly boiled them long enough, before spitting them out. That's when he gave in. It was no use. He would starve if his wife and daughter would not cook for him.

Before making him breakfast the wife and daughter made the man promise that he would definitely come along to listen to the storyteller. He did promise - and a promise is a serious commitment in India - that he would go, on one condition: that the wife and daughter went ahead and left him to go in his own time.

That night then, the wife and daughter went ahead, as agreed, while the man stayed behind until he could hear no one else passing their home. When all went quiet outside the man tentatively opened the door to make sure nobody was around and, seeing that the road was clear, he stepped anxiously outside. He had only gone a few paces when he heard some people coming up behind him and it was all he could do not to run back home. But the people didn't seem to even notice him. They went on by, talking excitedly about the storyteller, so the man relaxed a little and carried on towards the knoll.

By the time he got to the hillock there was already a large crowd gathered all around the storyteller, whose warm voice carried invitingly on the evening breeze. So many *people* though! Yet the man saw that they were all, every man, woman and child, entirely engrossed in what the performer had to say. Remembering his promise (and perhaps his belly too), the man walked carefully to the farthest edge of the crowd where he saw a broken piece of ancient wall, a crumbling corner of some bygone palace, and tucked himself into its shadow.

Well into his tale the storyteller was speaking about the powerful demon who had kidnapped Prince Rama's love, Sita, and carried her off to an unknown island. As the teller described the demon the audience hissed and grimaced, sharing their versions of the demon in gleefully evil looks. Nearest to him a young girl showed the man her own imitation of the demon and it was too much for him. Now that the girl had included him in the story others were showing him

their wild eyes and the man's heart began to pound, his hands and brow began to sweat, and he just wanted to run! He closed his eyes and, in that darkness, found comfort in the one place he felt safest: sleep.

He slept blissfully, his mouth hanging wide open as it always did, until the end of the nights' performance when the children went around sharing the syrupy sweets that the women had made and one lad, being afraid to wake the man, seeing his open mouth, popped a sweet inside. The man woke with a start to see a boy giggling nervously before hopping backwards with his bowl of sweets. The man couldn't help but smile too, sucking on his sweet. It was good. Not as good as his wife's sweets, but certainly a nice thing to wake up to.

People were drifting away from the knoll, joyful and sleepy, only a few noticing the man. None of the people sneered, or said horrible things to him. They only smiled and went on their way, so the man stood and went home himself, eating his sweet as he went and marvelling that he'd made it through a night outside - that nothing bad had happened to him - that here he was now, walking amongst the dwindling crowds!

It did not take long to get home but when he opened the door his wife and daughter launched themselves at him, saying how worried they were when they couldn't find him at the knoll or when they got home and...

"Tikka," said the man, "It's okay. I'm alright. I went to the story as I promised."

"You did!" shouted the wife with delight, "How was it? Did you enjoy the story?"

There was no way that the man was going to tell them that he had actually slept through the whole thing, hence - the taste of the sweet still in his mouth - he answered, "The story was...sweet."

"Yes," said the daughter, cooing like any other teenage girl, "The stories are so sweet, so full of love. If only I could meet a man like Rama," and her mum spun off into a whole spiel about being grateful to have whatever husband was chosen for her. And that was that.

He had got away with it.

But then the wife and daughter begged him to go *again*.

"Please," begged the wife, "If you come again I will cook you...sweets! I will cook so many sweets for you that you will think it's a wedding!"

It was not hard to agree. Afterall, nothing bad had happened. Nevertheless the man made the women promise to go ahead as before.

The next evening it was not so scary to leave the house. Sure, the man waited again until everyone had passed and still hid in his corner, and his heart still pounded and he sweated in a way that made him self-conscious, but nobody noticed he was there, let alone assaulted him.

With the story well in tow the man began to find that he was enjoying it, until it came to the part where Hanuman the monkey visited Rama and all the people, children and dad's especially, began to mimic monkey sounds too each other and laugh, some of them turning to offer the laughter to him, and it was too much. All those people *laughing* at him! So he closed his eyes and soon found comfort in the one place he felt the safest: sleep.

Now that night more people had come to the knoll than the previous night which meant that the crowds had pushed beyond the crag in the wall, where the man had taken refuge again, and in their eagerness to hear the story properly, where the man had fallen fast asleep, they had begun to move forward, bunching up to get as close to the teller as they could. Some children had ended up sitting on the corner of wall where the man slept and others had sidled right up to him, so that when the end of the story came and the man was roused by the movement around him, he felt stiff all over.

As he made his way home he rolled his shoulders and stretched his back to relieve the stiffness but otherwise returned to his wife and daughter unscathed - he'd even given a nod or two to passerby on his way and found folks' eyes to be kind and happy.

Barely letting him get in the door though, his wife and daughter jumped up to ask him what he had thought of the story this time and, feeling the aches of his uncomfortable night, he answered, "The story was...*heavy*."

"Mmm," agreed the wife, "That's right; the stories can be quite heavy, but don't you worry, there's always a happy ending," and that was certainly true for the man because his wife kept her side of the promise and made him sweets galore!

When the wife and daughter asked again whether he would go to the knoll the man readily agreed. There was no need for them to beg this time because the man had begun to realise that nothing bad would come of him going. That said, his wife did offer, seeing how stiffly he moved, to give him a good massage if he promised to go and, knowing what he would ask, she promised to let him go in his own time as before.

That night the man, enshadowed within his walled corner, was well into the story when the storyteller began to recount how Sita suffered on the island of the kidnapping demon. At this point people began to show their pantomime hatred for the awful demon and it was too much

for the man when they shared their storied distaste with him too. So many people, looking at him with *such* looks! So the man closed his eyes and soon found comfort in the one place he felt safest: sleep.

In the morning, as dawn began to press purple into the borders of black night, the man leant, still sleeping, in his corner - with his mouth wide open, of course. The knoll was all but deserted. Only the dogs were still there, eating bits of leftover chapatis and sweets. One of the dogs came over the broken bit of wall where the man slept and lifted its leg to have a wee - right into the mouth of the man!

In shock he woke up and spat and wretched his way home, but half laughing to himself at what had happened.

When he got home and his wife and daughter asked how he had found the story, tasting that terrible tang in his mouth, the man answered, "The story was...the story was...*bitter*," but he didn't stop there. Half choking as he tried not to swallow he went on, "And horrible...I think I might be sick..."

Knowing that he had gone too far and seeing the look in the eyes of his wife, who showed that she already knew - who always knew when he was lying but always waited patiently for him to come out with the truth - he told her and his daughter how he had fallen asleep each night.

Far from reproaching him, the wife and daughter apologised, saying how wrong they had been to let him go alone, how unfair that was to him. Tonight, they would go with him, and sit either side of him and pinch him each time he was tempted to fall asleep.

The man enjoyed the thought of snuggling up in his corner on the knoll, but when they went the wife and daughter led the husband *past* his precious broken wall, *past* the other people and right to the very *front* of the crowds, almost under the *feet* of the storyteller!

Whether it was how close he was or whether it was the story it was not long before the man was enraptured in its words, lost within the pictures they brought up in his mind, as though he was there himself, listening to how Hanuman the monkey had promised to take Rama's ring to Sita, to show her that he still loved her even though he had not managed to rescue her from the demon, and as the brave winged monkey had flown over the sea and dropped Rama's ring, the man jumped up! He shouted, "Don't worry Hanuman! I'll get the ring!" and he dived right into the deep waters of the story! Down, down, down he went to the bottom of the ocean where he saw Rama's glinting ring. Taking it in hand he swam back up, up, up to the surface of the sea and *burst* out!

In the man's hand, right there for everyone to see, was Rama's ring.

The wise storyteller gently took the ring from the man's open palm and, holding it up for all to see, he said to the crowds, "Never before, have I ever, seen someone dive so deeply into a story as to come back with actual treasure!"

Then the teller took the man's hand and slipped the ring onto his finger, where it sat comfortably alongside his wedding ring, and the storyteller said softly to the man, "Now, you are married to story."

People gathered round to see the ring and ask the man what it was like inside the sea and the man, in his own amazement, told them and didn't stop telling them all the way home or when they visited or he went out and about the town, where he was always greeted with smiles and nods of blessing and honour for the gift he had brought back from the holy story.

In time the man himself stood upon the knoll and told the story so that others could get lost in it, and those who heard told the story in other villages and towns and cities. The story made its way all around the world so that here I am now, telling you, because that is what happens when you, truly, *listen*.

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