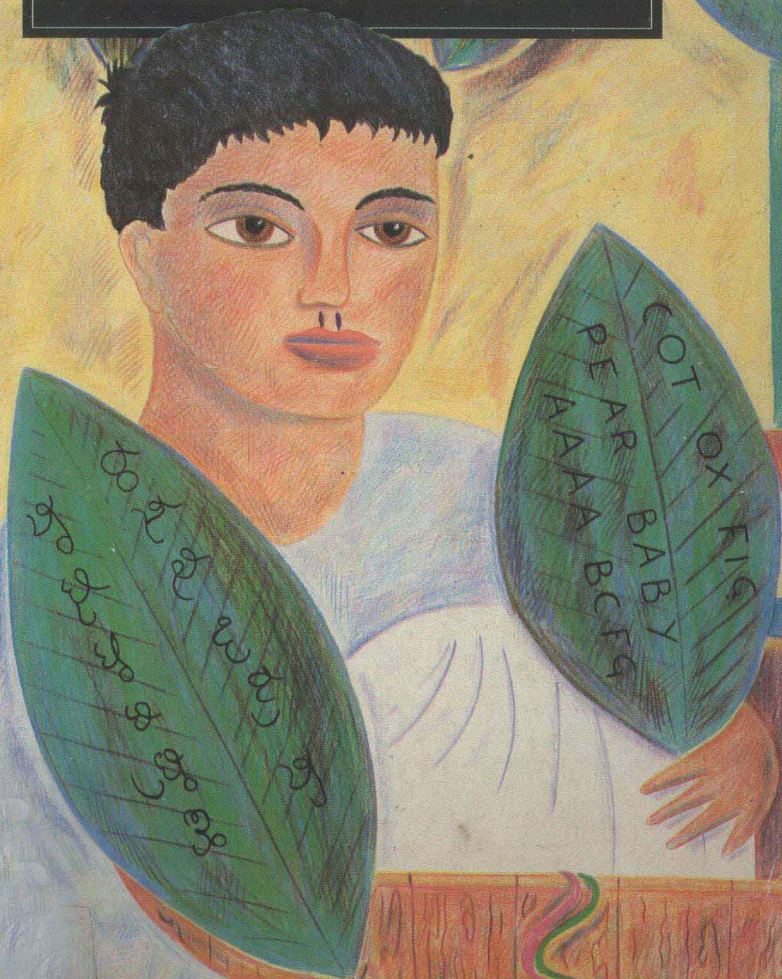


KING PENGUIN

R·K·NARAYAN

*UNDER THE
BANYAN TREE*



ce the death of Evelyn Waugh, Narayan is the novelist
mire most in the English language' – Graham Greene

R. K. NARAYAN

*Under the Banyan Tree
and Other Stories*



A KING PENGUIN
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INTRODUCTION

Out of the twenty-eight stories in the following pages, the first two were written this year, while the rest are—well, I won't call them old, as the date of a story is immaterial. A writer does not germinate, grow, and decay in the manner of a piece of vegetation. The conception seems to me irrelevant; a writer's output over the years cannot be studied as bio-historical material. A writer's early stories need not be worse than his later ones, and his so-called middle period may exhibit a dull competence rather than genius. I have faith in datelessness. A date-stamp may be necessary for a periodical, but not for a story. I came to this conclusion after trying to arrange the following stories in chronological order according to the year of publication. It didn't work, even in the few instances where I could guess the date. Then I tried to organize them according to the mood or theme of each, which again failed. Hence the only course left was to pick up a story at random, give it a number, and when all the stories were thus numbered and arranged, the collection displayed a strange but convincing pattern of affinities and contrasts.

I, for one, am prepared to assert that all theories of writing are bogus. Every writer develops his own method or lack of method and a story comes into being for some unknown reason and anyhow. The process involved cannot be stated theoretically. Once I was present at a lecture on creative writing. The lecturer began with: "All writing may be divided into two groups—good writing and bad writing. Good books come out of good writing while bad writing produces failures." When touching on the subject of the short story, the lecturer said: "A short story must be short and have a story." At this point I left unobtrusively, sympathizing with the man's predicament.

If asked, I cannot explain how a story comes to be written. All

that I can say is that at one time I found material for my stories in the open air, market-place, and streets of Mysore. At an early stage of my life I enjoyed a lot of freedom, no one in our family minding my non-economic style of living. I read a little, also attempted to write, and went out on long walks along the tanks, parks, and avenues, or climbed the hill which looms over our city; and during some part of the day I watched also the crowds at the market—not deliberately or consciously to pick up a subject but for the sheer pleasure of watching people. The very first story I wrote was about a one-armed beggar who stood in the middle of a narrow street in front of a coffee-house and sailed forth with up-held palm when he spotted young men emerging from the restaurant in a merry, convivial mood. I wrote my first short story about him under the title “The One-Armed Giant.” I remember clearly the first line—“One armed, he certainly was, but he was no more a giant than you or I”—which sounded excellent. I don’t remember much of the story, which is lost in oblivion, originally published in *The Hindu* of Madras nearly four decades ago. The editor was generous enough to accept it although as I recollect it revolved round a flimsy theme—of the beggar’s obsessive desire to acquire an old jacket. Following its publication I became a regular writer for *The Hindu*. The driving force was the need to write two stories a month to survive. Most of the stories in the present volume were born out of desperation to meet the deadline on alternate Thursdays for the Sunday column.

As I have mentioned, I realized that the short story is the best medium for utilizing the wealth of subjects available. A novel is a different proposition altogether, centralized as it is on a major theme, leaving out, necessarily, a great deal of the available material on the periphery. Short stories, on the other hand, can cover a wider field by presenting concentrated miniatures of human experience in all its opulence.

A story may have its origin in a personal experience or a bit of observation or a conversation overheard. “A Breath of Lucifer” was dictated by me into a cassette when I had to spend ten days in bed with eyes bandaged following a cataract operation, and was attended on by a crazy male nurse. “Annamalai” is almost a documentary of a strange personality who served as a watchman in

my bungalow for fifteen years; "A Horse and Two Goats" was suggested by an American friend's visit to my house one evening in a station wagon, crammed with an enormous clay horse which he had picked up at a wayside village. "The Shelter" developed out of a whispered conversation between a couple, overheard during a bus journey.

About the arrangement, as I have already mentioned, it is not chronological. The only compulsion I admitted to myself was to place "Nitya," which is the story of a sparkling young mind, with rebellion at heart, at the head of the collection, and at the end the story of an old Story-Teller who concludes his career by taking a vow of silence for the rest of his life, realizing that a Story-Teller must have the sense to know when to stop, and not wait for others to tell him.

R. K. Narayan
February 21, 1984

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Nitya



Nitya, at six on Friday morning," said his father determinedly, "we leave by bus." Nitya had noticed preparations at home for this trip, Mother planning a packed lunch for three and filling a basket with coconut, flowers, and incense for worship at the temple. Nitya very well knew how much he was involved in their plans. His mother had talked of nothing else whenever he stepped into the kitchen for coffee. "After all, a vow has to be fulfilled," she would keep repeating. Nitya would try to change the subject, banter, joke about it, and run away. They had made a vow to God in a distant hill that Nitya's head would be shaved clean and his hair offered with due rites if his life was spared. That was when he was two years old and stricken with whooping cough and convulsions. Now he was twenty, and although the time limit for fulfilment seemed to be past, yet, they felt, it would not be safe or proper to postpone further. When casually turning the leaves of an old diary, Father discovered the record of their promise to God. Mother, too, recollected having knotted a little coin in a piece of cloth as a reminder, although she could not trace it now. The promise and the diary were lost sight of during Nitya's growing years when the family suddenly found itself drawn into a legal battle over their property. The case was prolonged year after year through the labours of a specially gifted lawyer on the opposite side who could manoeuvre a postponement out of the toughest judge at a crucial point, with the idea of starting it all over again before a new judge in due course. Father was determined to fight it out as the will was unequivocally in his favour and made him sole heir to the property. By the time the

final decision came his assets had dwindled, his lawyer himself had changed from a scintillating youth of promise to a toothless character in a frayed gown haunting the corridors of the civil court.

Today, when Father mentioned a firm date for the trip, Nitya protested, "It doesn't concern me, your twenty-year-old promise. You had no business to pawn my scalp without consulting me." "You were only two years old then."

"You should have done it when you could handle my head as you pleased."

"But you were very sick and for a long time, too."

"I have survived, which proves that the disease died rather than me and so where is God's hand in this, if there is a God and if he is interested in my hair?"

His parents were aghast at his manner of talk. Mother pleaded, "Whatever you do, don't talk like that."

Father admonished, "Nitya, you must not be blasphemous. If God hadn't responded to our prayers and saved your life . . ." He could not complete the sentence.

"Was it a bargain?" Nitya asked leeringly.

"Yes," replied his father. "It was indeed a bargain and there can be no going back on it."

"Very well, but the head offered for a shave was not yours. You have been carrying on negotiations with a commodity that did not belong to you."

"It was for your welfare."

"Did I ask for it?" Nitya asked puckishly. His mother burst into tears. Father remarked with a scowl, "You talk like a sinner, cold and godless. Wonder where you inherited it from."

At this point their neighbour, an alcoholic who had stationed himself in front of the house listening to their debate, suddenly thundered from the street, "Silence! I am wifeless. Others have two or three—selfish bastards!" He had been a chief engineer in government service, but was dismissed for drunkenness, and later abandoned by his family, too. Nitya loved his antics as he strode up and down the street shouting obscenities after visits to the tavern at the market. Nitya had noted in his private journal: "The merry engineer mistook the kitchen for the toilet, and that proved

too much for his better half." Now on the pretext of sending him away, Nitya went down the steps and escaped his parents. Later, however, his father kept a close watch on him and clung to him till they reached their seats in the yellow bus at the market gate on Friday.

Father looked triumphant with Nitya secure at his side in the bus, and engaged him in small talk. Mother sat away from them in a back row, enjoying the company of women returning to their villages. The bus passed through Ellaman and crossed Nallappa's Grove and climbed the other bank of the river, splashing up water. The driver displayed immense self-assurance and goaded his bus on with reckless gusto. Passengers were tossed sideways and jolted up and down, but no one minded except Nitya. "What sort of journey is this?"

"You must learn to be patient, my boy, ours is a poor country. We cannot afford the luxuries they have in Bombay or Madras." The passengers, mostly villagers, were happy chatting and laughing and also exchanging jokes with the conductor from time to time. Passengers got in and out all along the route whenever the bus stopped with its wheels screeching and churning up dust. At certain points the bus became almost empty, at others overcrowded, the conductor shouting, "Move up, move up." People got in somehow and stayed on somehow, packed to the wind-screen. No one protested, but parted with their coins cheerfully. The conductor, hanging on the footboard precariously, pocketed all the cash, which inspired Nitya to note in his diary, "The bus rocks and sways, and sighs with its burden, but won't burst yet. Perhaps the last straw is yet to arrive. But the real question is, Who owns this? Definitely not this conductor, though he grows heavier every minute with the coins dropping like manna into his pocket."

"You should get down here and walk up to that hill, the bus can't take you there," said the conductor at a stop. They struggled their way out of the bus, Mother carrying her bundle of offerings and food delicately through the crush. As the bus started on its way again, Father asked the driver, "When are you returning?"

"At five, six, or seven; if you miss, tomorrow morning."

The temple perched on a hillock was visible across the field, but

it was impossible to judge the distance. A track formed by the tread of feet meandered through the fields. They had to cross in single file with Nitya in the middle, Father ahead, and Mother bringing up the rear. Nitya reflected, Afraid I might run away, they are sandwiching me. But what chance have I, trapped by slush and vegetation on both sides of this narrow path.

An hour's walk brought them to a hamlet skirting the base of the hillock. Nitya was on the point of asking, Why come so far, if God is everywhere? I could as well have surrendered my head to our Vinayak Street barber, who shaves you at your doorstep. As if reading his mind, Father began to explain, "This temple was established by our ancestors five hundred years ago—earlier; it's on this hill that Kumara annihilated the demon whose name I can't recollect now."

"Demon is a demon, whatever the name," said the young man. Father ignored his quip and continued, "The temple was built by a Chola king who ruled these parts, and in course of time it was turned over to the care of our ancestors."

"How are you sure?" Nitya asked.

"You've got into the habit of questioning everything."

"I just want to know, that's all."

"Well, it is all recorded in copper plate, stone pillars, and palm leaves, from which deductions are made by scholars. Don't imagine you are the only wise man. There is a document in the temple in palm leaf mentioning my great-grandfather by name and committing our family to the expenses of the annual Chariot Festival. I pay them two hundred rupees a year and twenty measures of rice for a public feast on that day. They come to the town for collections in December, ten days before the festival. . . . Luckily, a copy of this document is in my possession with the receipts of annual payments which clinched the issue in our favour at the appellate stage." Nitya noted later in his diary, "Even at this distance and on a consecrated spot my father is unable to keep his mind off the civil court, verily like the engineer of his wifelessness." When they came to the border of the village, Father slowed his steps and, with a slight frown, threw a general question in the air: "Where is everybody?" as if the reception committee had failed him.

He halted at a corner and shouted, "Hey, Rama," and a group of women and boys emerged from some corner and came running on seeing him. They invited him into their homes. Father said impatiently, "Yes, later. First the temple. Call the headman."

"They are all away weeding," said a woman, and turning to a young man jabbed his cheek with her forefinger and said, "Run up and tell Rama that the Trustee is come." The boy shot off like an arrow. They dragged out of their homes an assortment of furniture and put it up in the shade of a tree, and then bustled about and conjured up a bunch of bananas and a jug of milk for the visitors and laid the fare on a wooden stool. Nitya cried, "Oh, just what I need," and tried to reach out for a fruit, but Father said, "Not now, after the vow." (Nitya noted in his diary, "Not now, but after the vow, says God through my father in a perfect rhyme, while the banana wilts in the tray and the milk curdles irreparably.") The headman arrived. After the initial courtesies, much business talk ensued, with a crowd standing around and listening intently. Father inquired authoritatively, "Where is the priest? The temple must be opened. We have to leave by the evening bus."

The headman said out of courtesy, "Must you? You may spend the night at the rest house, sir. You have come after a long time."

Immediately, Nitya protested, "You may both stay back if you choose, but I want to catch the bus," feeling nostalgic for his evening group at the College Union. Mother said, "Be patient." But Nitya replied, "I've much to do this evening." Father said, "What could be more important than your duty to God? Be patient, having come so far."

The temple priest, his forehead ablaze with sacred ash and vermilion, shoulder wrapped in a red shawl, a lanky person with a booming voice, arrived, dangling a large key in an iron hoop. After greeting the Trustee in the correct manner, he plunged straight into business, cataloguing his demands.

"The well at the temple needs to be deepened. The temple lock must be replaced. It is worn out, sir. These are very bad days. We are finding it difficult to get flowers for the worship. We were getting supplies from the other village. But they raise their rates each time and are very irregular too. They have to come up from the

other side of the hill and don't like it, and so have started a rumour that they see a wolf or panther prowling around, and have stopped coming altogether."

"Nonsense, only an excuse," cried Father. "No panther or tiger in these parts, never heard such rubbish in my life."

"He mentioned wolf, not tiger," corrected Nitya.

"What if? It is just gossip and nonsense—the rumour-mongers!" Father cried with passion, looking outraged at the notion of any wild life in the vicinity of his ancestral temple. He dismissed the subject peremptorily and commanded, "Get the barber down. My son's tonsure today whatever happens," and the assembly looked with fresh interest at Nitya's head, at which he simpered, squirmed, and ran his fingers through his crop. The priest turned to a little fellow in the crowd and said, "Don't bite your nail, you fool! Go to the tank bund and tell Raghavan to come up with his tin box immediately, this very second. Run, run." The little messenger was off like a shot again.

They started up the hill, led by the priest, a crowd following. It was a short climb, but Nitya's mother panted and rested in three places, while Father hovered around her and fidgeted impatiently. The climb ended at the door of the temple, which was unlocked, and two large doors were pushed open. It was a little shrine with a granite-pillared hall and paved corridor around the sanctum, which housed an image on a pedestal. Father became grim and devout. Mother shut her eyes and recited a prayer. The priest lit the wicks in the sanctum and the image began to glow with the oil anointed on it and gradually took shape. The priest was grumbling, "Even this oil is adulterated nowadays." He had managed to secure a handful of marigolds and nerium and stuck them on the image. While they were all in this state of elation, the young messenger returned from his mission and bellowed from the door, "The barber's house is locked, not a soul there."

"Did you ask the neighbours?"

"They don't know. They only saw the family go out for the bus with their baggage."

Nitya cried aloud, "God is great, really."

Father commented, "This is the worst of it, having one barber

for the whole place. He thinks he can do what he pleases. One and only Padmavathi for a whole city, as the saying goes," he said, unable to contain himself. His wife said with a frown, "Hush! What awful words to utter in this place" (Padmavathi was a reference to a whore). Father glowered at her for checking him, but they were all assembled in the presence of God and could not engage in acrimony. Nitya giggled but suppressed himself when his father glanced in his direction. The headman said in a respectful whisper, "Raghavan cannot make both ends meet unless he ekes out with the fee for playing the pipe at weddings. It is their family tradition." Father leaned over to Mother and whispered, "For thousands of years somehow barbers have also been outstanding pipers and custodians of pure classical music." While this was going on, the priest sounded a bell and circled a camphor flame around the image and they stopped talking and were lost in meditation.

When the priest came out of the sanctum, bearing a tray with camphor flame, a discussion began as to what course of action the scriptures prescribed when an essential barber was absent.

"We are at the mercy of a single man," Father kept repeating monotonously, firmly suppressing the name "Padmavathi," which kept bobbing up again and again on his tongue. The priest put the tray back in the sanctum, came out, and joined the discussion. He finally said, gaping at Nitya's crop, which was the main topic of discussion and purpose of the trip, "Sometimes, the vow is taken to be fulfilled through a token performance with penalty added. These days young men will not allow barbers to come near them."

"They won't allow their terrifying whiskers to be touched either!" added Father.

"No tonsure is possible unless done in babyhood," said the priest.

"Too true, well spoken," said Nitya, pleased with the tenor of talks, and offered, "Get me a pair of scissors, and I will give you four inches of my front lock, the best available—that's all, and God will be satisfied. After all, with so many offerings, where can he keep his collection?"

The priest said, "The fruits and coconuts you have brought are adequate, leave them behind, and add whatever cash you can spare."

Father and Mother looked disappointed and kept throwing covetous glances at Nitya's head. Nitya felt relieved, but the relief threatened to be short-lived. Soon there was a commotion. Someone at the doorway announced excitedly, "Raghavan is coming up," followed by the appearance of a fat barber holding in his hand a tiny tin box. He was panting and perspiring; he stared at the gathering from the doorway, and without a word went straight to the well at the backyard, peeled off his vest, drew a pot of water and emptied it over his head, and reappeared, dripping and ready. "He never opens his razor box without a bath at first when he has to perform a tonsure ceremony," explained the priest admiringly. The barber explained, "I had only gone to a nearby farm for a baby's first shave, that was all."

"Not to play the pipe at a wedding?" someone asked.

"Oh, no. I have jealous neighbours who create false rumours to spoil my business. If I had known the Trustee was coming I would not have accepted even a thousand pieces of gold anywhere outside. When the boy came on a bicycle and told me, I snatched it from his hand and rode down immediately. Now I am ready, my master." Father and Mother looked pleased at this turn of events. Nitya giggled at the thought of the fat barber on the boy's bicycle. Father took Nitya by hand. "Let us sit on that stone platform in the corridor, that's where he shaves—"

Nitya shook himself free and said, "I agreed to give four inches of hair, it was up to you to have taken it. Now you have lost the opportunity, which must be seized by the forelock."

"Now, with this man here, we must fulfil the vow as originally promised," said Mother.

"Let Father use the barber if he likes. I'm not interested."

The barber started pleading and arguing. The priest edged up to Nitya with his pleas and said ingratiatingly, "You must not hurt your parents' feelings. Please move on to that platform, the barber is ready."

"But my head is not ready. You promised to accept four inches of my hair. Now you are demanding my head itself. Have you no

logic or reason? No contentment or consistency? How can God tolerate fickle-minded people like you! Now I have changed my mind—I won't give even an inch . . ."

Both Father and Mother cried simultaneously, "Don't talk to the priest like that in his own temple." Nitya was angry, also hungry. They would not let him touch even one plantain out of the dozens offered by the villagers under the tree. While his parents stood staring at him helplessly, Nitya suddenly turned on his heel, dashed out, and sped downhill saying, "I will wait for you both at the bus stop, but only till the bus arrives. . . ."