

**A Hero** by R K Narayan

Father looked up over the newspaper he was reading under the hall lamp.

“Swami, my boy,” he said, “Listen to this: ‘News is to hand of the bravery of a village boy who, while returning home by a jungle path, came face to face with a tiger...’

The story described the fight the boy had with the tiger and his flight up a tree where he had stayed for half a day till some people came that way and killed the tiger.

Father looked at Swami fixedly and said, “What do you say to that?”

Swami said, “I think he must have been a very strong grown up person, not a boy. How could a boy fight a tiger?”

“You think you are wiser than the newspaper?” Father sneered. “A man may have the strength of an elephant and yet be a coward. Courage is everything, strength and age are not important.”

“How can that be, Father? Suppose I have all the courage in the world, what can I do if a tiger attacks me?”

“Forget strength, can you prove you even have courage? Let’s see if you can sleep alone to night in my office.”

A frightening proposition, Swami thought. He always slept beside his granny in the passage.

Any change in this arrangement kept him awake trembling all night.

The office was far way at the end of the building. He hoped that his father was only joking and tried to change the subject. So he said loudly and with great enthusiasm, “We are going to admit the big boys into our cricket club from now on. We are buying brand new bats and balls.

Our captain has asked me to tell you....”

“We’ll talk about that tomorrow,” Father cut in. “You must sleep alone from now on.”

Swami realised it had become a command.

“From the first of next month I’ll sleep alone, Father.”

“No. You must start tonight. It is disgraceful sleeping beside your granny like a baby. You are in the second form and I don’t at all like the way you are being brought up,” he said and looked at his wife.

“Why look at me?” she asked. “I hardly know anything about the boy. If you mean that your mother is spoiling him, tell her so.”

Swami tiptoed away to his bed in the passage.

Granny was sitting up in her bed and said, “Boy, are you already feeling sleepy? It’s still quite early. Don’t you want a story?”

Swami made wild gestures to silence her and pulled the blanket over his face.

Granny said, “Don’t cover your face. Are you really very sleepy?”

Swami whispered, “Please shut up, Granny. Don’t talk to me and don’t let anyone call me even if the house is on fire.” He curled up and snored under the blanket. Suddenly it was pulled away.

Father stood over him. “Swami, get up.” he said. He looked like a phantom in the semidarkness of the passage. Swami groaned as if in sleep.

“Get up!” father said again.

Swami got up. Father rolled up his bed, took it under his arm and said, “Come with me.”

Swami followed his father down the long corridors to the office room.

“Let me sleep in the hall, Father,” Swami pleaded. Your office room is very dusty and there may be scorpions behind your law books.”

“There are no scorpions, little fellow. But sleep on the bench if you like.”

“Can I have a lamp burning in the room?”

“No. You must learn not to be afraid of darkness. It is only a question of habit.”

“Will you leave the door open?”

“All right. But promise you will not roll up your bed and go back to your Granny. If you do I

will make you the laughing stock of your school.”

Swami was pained and angry. He didn't like the cruelty he saw in his father. He hated the newspaper for printing the tiger's story. He wished that the tiger had eaten the boy.

As the night advanced the darkness and the silence in the house deepened. He remembered all the stories of demons and ghosts he heard. How his chum Mani had seen a devil in the Banyan tree at the end of the street. He felt faint with fear. All kinds of noises reached his ears. The ticking of clocks, the rustle of trees, snoring sounds. He could hardly breathe. Every moment he expected devils to come and carry him away.

He got up, spread his bed under the bench and crouched there. It seemed a much safer place. He shut his eyes, encased himself in his blanket and unknown to himself fell asleep. He was racked by nightmares. A tiger was chasing him, but his feet stuck to the ground. He could hear its claws, scratch, scratch.... and then a light thud, he tried to open his eyes, he put his hand out to feel his Granny's presence but he only touched the wooden leg of the bench. He sweated with fright. And now.... what was this rustling? Finally, his eyes opened. Something was moving in the darkness. He lay gazing at it in horror. His end had come. The devil, he thought, would soon pull him out and tear him to pieces so why should he wait? Propelled by fear, he crawled out from under the bench, grabbed the devil with all his might and used his teeth on it like a mortal weapon.

“AI..YO!! Something has bitten me,” went forth an agonized cry followed by a heavy tumbling and crashing amidst furniture and more cries of pain. Father, cook and a servant rushed in carrying a light

All three of them fell on a burglar who lay amidst the furniture with a bleeding leg.

Next day, congratulations were showered on Swami. His classmates looked at him with respect and his teacher patted his back.

Swami had bitten into the flesh of one of the most notorious house-breakers in the district and the police were grateful to him for it.

The Inspector said, “Why don't you join the police when you grow up?”

Swami said, for the sake of politeness “Certainly.” though he had quite made up his mind to be an engine driver later in life.

That night, when Father returned from the club, he demanded, “Where is the boy?”

“He is asleep,” said Mother.

“Already?”

“He didn't have a wink of sleep all last night,” said Mother.

“Where is he sleeping?”

“In his usual place,” Mother said casually. “He went to bed at seven-thirty.”

“Sleeping beside his Granny again!” Father said. “No wonder he wanted to be asleep before I could return home - clever boy! I give up on him.”

Swami, following the whole conversation from under his blanket, felt tremendously relieved to hear that his father was giving up on him.