

Vikram, the Tiger, and Dr. Yang

Vikram's village was the most beautiful in the world – at least that's what they thought of it in his village. People were always laughing and happy, celebrating festivals every day of the week. It didn't matter sometimes that there was little to eat. Or, when some child died suddenly, everyone would be silent for a moment, tears as large as pearls would fall from their eyes, and then someone would remember that it was a very special day of the year, because of some saint's miracles; or because something good had happened long ago; or a great man had been born that very day.

The people of the village were very proud of their long, colourful history; so many wonderful things had happened long ago, that most had been forgotten, or reinvented as stories everyone could understand. Those long-forgotten events must have been wonderful, for through the wilderness all round rose great, ancient, crumbly, ruined walls of granite, where birds nested among the sculptures.

So, they had many stories to tell each other, and feel happy about, no matter what was happening to them right then. They might be desperately poor, but they were proud, and happy to be proud. They sang in the mornings, they danced in the evenings, and during the drowsy afternoons, they told stories they had heard, or made up then and there. But they were also happy about the large herds of goats they had, which fed them when the fields were empty of corn, and the streams were dry.

But in all that festivity, there was one creature that hid in the dark forests, which would pounce and ruin everything till they cheered up once again. This was a tiger, which would leap out with a loud growl and snatch away a couple of their goats from their kitchen, right from under their noses. No one liked this. They hated the tiger. Vikram most of all.

Vikram was a very strong, handsome man. His mother said so. Every week she oiled his bulging muscles so that he could admire his reflection in the stream that ran through the village, that is, when there was water in it. While no girl openly admired him like his mother, Vikram was sure from their sidelong glances that they liked him secretly as well. If he was the most handsomest man in the village, clearly it was his duty to drive away that thieving tiger.

Vikram gathered all the young men in the village, and they made up rude songs about the tiger, how he was a cowardly tiger, afraid to face the brave men of the village, how ugly he looked, how uncultured he was, without songs, or dancing, or festivities. They sang these songs, and danced on the streets, till everybody laughed, and the men were tired, and all the mothers came out and fed them great platefuls of spicy food. They ate so much that there was nothing left for the little girls, but no one minded that because the men were so brave.

They sang these songs every week to frighten away the tiger, till one morning it pounced with a low growl into the village clearing, tearing Vikram's silk shirt, that his mother had so proudly stitched for him, and ran away into the jungle carrying two goats. Imagine such effrontery! The men were livid with rage. Vikram's face went from brown to pink to red, till his mother consoled him by promising to stitch him another silk shirt, with the money she sometimes earned by working in the fields.

But the incident rankled with Vikram. He brooded. Then he cheered up, for he knew what he had to do. This time a few girls made up a cloth effigy of the tiger. All the men beat a drum and danced round the effigy, beating it about, spitting on it, and kicking it with their feet. Then they burnt it ceremoniously in the middle of the village square. That would be the end of the tiger.

But the tiger which had no culture anyway didn't seem to care one bit what they all thought about it. Next time they were celebrating the monthly 'Hate Tiger Day,' it pounced in their midst, scattering the men in all directions, went up to the goat pen as bold as brass, seized a couple of the goats and calmly made off with its booty.

Such arrogance was not to be put up with. The men screamed slogans against the tiger, they tied black scarves round their heads and called themselves the Tiger Death Watch; they held solemn meetings, they drew maps, they argued over plans. The women waited on them hand and foot while they deliberated, and at night were very quiet when the men came home tired from the meetings. While the men were discussing how to oppose the tiger, disputes and disagreements cropped up amongst them; the men split into two, then three, and then into four camps, with hardly a polite word said to each other.

Vikram called a big meeting of all the groups, and harangued them from a big dais that had been built for the purpose.

"Brothers in Arms! All Men of the Village who Hate the Tiger! Welcome!" he roared. "We are all gathered in Unity today, because We are as One, against the Hated Tiger. Let the Tiger beware! This time there is no escape for him! This time since we are all united, he shall perish – He the Greedy One! He the One without Culture! He the one without a Village! He against whom we have declared War!"

All the men happily shouted "War! War! War!," till you couldn't hear a word said over the din. Suddenly, despite the noise, they heard the roar of the tiger. The men sprang apart. The tiger leapt through the opening in their ranks, on to the dais, and once again tearing Vikram's new silk shirt it made off into the jungle carrying two more goats.

Once the tiger had disappeared, everyone gathered round Vikram and congratulated him on his courage, and loudly and solemnly vowed to avenge this fresh attack by the tiger. Vikram's mother noticed that in tearing his shirt, the tiger's claws had also left three red stripes on his arm, out of which blood was slowly starting to drip. Hastily she washed the wound with water from the village well, and bound it up with cloth torn from the edge of her sari.

Vikram, though badly shaken, strutted about the village streets, conspicuously showing off his bandaged arm for all to admire. The men were glad they hadn't been wounded, and started to envy him a little for all the attention he was getting from the girls. In the evenings, as the days wore on, Vikram began to elaborate little by little the incident when he was hurt by the tiger, till he and his listeners began to believe that it had been a long life and death struggle, from which the tiger had emerged badly injured, at death's door actually, and had slunk off into the jungle to die, at least never to return.

Vikram waited impatiently for the day when he could remove the bandage and show off the wicked claw marks on his arm, but the wound refused to heal, became puffed up, and started to seep pus, causing him real pain. No one knew whether it was the dirty water of the village or the dirty cloth that had caused the wound to become septic, but the wise woman in the village was sure after the tenth day that it needed looking at by an experienced doctor.

Now Vikram's village was a remote one, and the only reliable doctor was to be found over the large hill to the north, in a valley his people rarely visited, though they had heard much about their distant neighbours. There was no other way but for Vikram to make a long journey over the high hill and visit the doctor on the other side. So his mother made up nice things for him to eat on the way; and all the people turned up to see him off, with many a starry-eyed girl weeping inconsolably when they at last lost sight of him over the brow of the hill.

It was a long, though not unpleasant walk over the high hill. Vikram would have enjoyed it quite a lot, for it was a fine day, but for his arm aching like the dickens. He moaned a little every now and then, but cheered up at lunch time, and made quite a nice meal of the many goodies his mother had made especially for him. He particularly relished the sweets she had packed at the bottom of the basket. As the shades of evening drew long, he climbed down the steep slope on the other side of the hill, holding on to shrubs and stunted trees that grew along the way to keep himself from sliding and getting hurt some more. Finally, after gingerly making his way round a very large smooth boulder, he dropped the last ten feet to the ground, almost to his great surprise by the open door of a shiny ambulance, with a revolving blue light, and a banner painted in red, which said: *"Welcome to Neighbour Hero Vikram!"*

He was quite astonished at this, but the smiling nurses who ushered him into the ambulance just nodded and said nothing in reply to his questions. They wiped his face with a hot towel, gave him a tall glass of very refreshing lemon juice, and took his temperature, after making him comfortable on a nice clean soft bed inside the ambulance, which sped along its siren wailing. Vikram looked out of the window with interest, as he lay stretched out, tired but comfortable. This neighbouring place was nothing like the village he had left behind. For one thing, it seemed to be very large, with busy streets lined with well-lit shops, restaurants, and theatres. The streets were also full of well-dressed people, getting in and out of shops and into taxis, buses, and trams. Well, it was all very impressive, but it wasn't like home.

In fact, Vikram felt he didn't quite like the place. He couldn't put his finger on what he disapproved of, perhaps, it was the busy orderliness of the place, yes, that was it, it was all like some clockwork, not at all comfy. For one thing, all he could smell was antiseptic, and nowhere he could see mounds of garbage rotting, with flies humming all round, or rats jumping out. And the people – well, they all seemed to come out of a mould, rather flashy and well-fed, but nothing more. Even all the kids were round, there wasn't one skinny kid running bare-assed to poke fun at. But the way the nurses looked after him, they were kind, he would give them that.

The ambulance at last stopped outside a white hospital, and the door was opened by an old man in a white coat, who looked like a doctor.

“ Welcome! Welcome! Neighbour Hero Vikram!” he said smiling, and bowing, his hands folded one into the other in front. “ I am Doctor Yang. Nie- Houu?”

“ How are my knees? Perfectly well, thank you, though that beastly hill took a lot out of them, I can tell you,” said Vikram a little irritably, at the formal politeness of the doctor. “ It's this arm I am worried about.” And he held out his swollen bandaged arm to the doctor.

Dr. Yang looked very serious, and drew in his breath sharply after peering at the arm through his thick glasses. Then he hurried Vikram into the cool hospital, and refused to answer any questions while he made Vikram swallow a large white pill, and a red-and-green capsule. Vikram had to take two gulps of water before they would go down his throat. Again he started to ask questions, but the doctor shushed him, helped the nurses take off most of his clothes, down to his underpants, and then swathed him in a nice white fluffy cotton dressing gown. Vikram was forced gently into a large white bed, and while a nurse adjusted the pillows, Dr. Yang took out a needle and syringe from a drawer near the bed.

“This won't hurt a bit,” said Dr. Yang smiling, while he cleared out a tiny stream of liquid from the needle tip. “ It is good for you to take this injection. If you like, you can look the other way.”

Vikram turned his head away, for honestly he didn't want to see the needle poking into his arm. Biting his lip, he waited for the sting of the needle, but he didn't feel a thing.

“ Well, that wasn't so bad, was it,” said Dr. Yang, with his fixed smile, as he threw the needle into a waste-basket. “ We will now dress your wound.” Very carefully, he and a nurse unwrapped the bandage, which had got quite dirty by then. It did hurt a bit when the doctor gingerly swabbed the wound clean, but Vikram was beginning to feel better already as the doctor fixed a new bandage on his arm.

“ Thank you, doctor, for your help,” said Vikram politely. “ I am sure now you have looked at it, it will heal quickly. I better get back to my village, though frankly I don't look forward to the climb at night.”

The doctor continued to smile and bow, but he drew in his breath sharply.

“ I am afraid that it not possible. You must rest now, you are very tired. Tomorrow morning, we will examine the wound again and then decide when you may be able to go home. But I think you may have to stay here at least for a couple of days, before I am sure it is healing.”

Vikram was not accustomed to all this fuss. The doctor was no better than his own mother. He started to remonstrate, but the nurses had already brought in dinner, in a great steaming tray. It smelled delicious, and after a few more polite objections, and thank-yous, Vikram settled down to enjoy a meal of clear egg-drop soup, lemon fish on a bed of soft noodles surrounded by crisply-cooked almonds, baby corn, and mushrooms. At the end of his meal, they gave him a pill along with his ice-cream, which made him fall into a painless, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Dr. Yang bustled in with another doctor who looked exactly like him, at least to Vikram, who had just finished a wholesome breakfast of steamed dumplings.

“ Ah! I see your appetite has come back. That is very good sign,” said Dr. Yang jovially. “ Here is Dr. Chung. I want him to have a look at your arm. He is a specialist in these matters of infection caused by animal attacks.”

Dr. Chung looked long at the wound, which already was beginning to look less angry. Then he asked one of the nurses to prepare some slides of the droplets of pus that could still be seen. Then he gave Vikram a big smile.

“ This afternoon the lab reports will come in, and then we will know what course of treatment we must follow.” Then bowing deeply to Dr. Yang, who also bowed deeply in return, the specialist doctor bustled out. Vikram gave up trying to argue with Dr. Yang, and settled back in his bed to watch a programme on the TV set that the nurses had rigged up over his bed. Time passed easily. He looked out of the window at the neatly swept lawns of the hospital, on which a couple of birds were hopping about picking up any worms they could find. Well, these people were all right, thought Vikram, except they didn't seem to have any fun. They just worked, and that wasn't life was it, now?

The sumptuous lunch was just as delicious as the dinner of the night before, and in the gentle warmth of the afternoon, he closed his eyes to take a little siesta. Dr. Yang and Dr. Chung came in with the tea. Perched on either side of his bed, and helping themselves to an occasional biscuit, they explained his case to him. And though they kept smiling cheerfully all the time, he learnt that it was not a simple infection, but something caused by a very long word that seemed to end in ‘coccus,’ whatever that was, and so he should stay in hospital for a few more days, till it was all cleared away. Vikram said he didn't feel any pain any more, and the doctors nodded and said that was a very good sign, but he had to stay, and that was that.

Vikram was a little anxious that his mother might be worried over his absence, but then said a nurse, who surprisingly broke into speech, she would rather have him back all well and clean than sick with a bad infection, wouldn't she? Vikram had to agree. He also thought his absence would be talked about in the village by everyone, including the girls, and great would be the welcome when he went back home. So he lay back to enjoy his stay in the hospital, imagining the welcoming party the village would give in his honour.

The days passed swiftly. The nurses who were always in and out of his room were beginning to talk a little more, and he learned a lot about his neighbours through their conversation. They were very fair, if only the girls from his village could be that fair! But he didn't think any of the nurses were beautiful, not with those slinky eyes, he couldn't. The two doctors were both short and round, with thick glasses, not at all handsome like his village men. They hardly said anything to his questions; they just smiled, or nodded, or gave him an injection, or made him swallow a pill.

Finally on the fourth morning, the nurses brought in his clothes all neatly washed and ironed, and signaled to him to wear them once again. Vikram was very happy to do so, and was admiring himself in the mirror on the wall when Dr. Yang came in with a thick wad of papers, which he said were his latest 'reports.'

"The infection, honoured guest, is cleared," said Dr. Yang with a deep bow. "You can depart at any time. You are well." He smiled and bowed again. "Mr. Sun from the Ministry is here with a few small gifts for your village."

Mr. Sun looked exactly like Dr. Yang and Dr. Chung, he was short and round and wore thick glasses, and smiled a lot. He bustled forward with brightly packaged gifts tied up with blue ribbons. "Some silks for the ladies, and some special sweets for men. We know you like sweets much – a lot!"

He burst out into embarrassed laughter, and Dr. Yang joined in, almost hysterically, thought Vikram. All the nurses were now lined up along the wall of his room, and were smiling and bowing.

As Vikram prepared to leave with his gifts strapped to his back, he turned to his hosts and asked: "Tell me, does the tiger not steal your goats? How do you manage to keep him out?"

Mr. Sun and Dr. Yang giggled. "Goats in pens in agricultural farms," said Mr. Sun at last. "Tiger can't get in without password. We not give him – Password!" Mr. Sun bowed and giggled some more.

Vikram was baffled to say the least. "Tell me, how did you do all this?" he asked with a vague wave of his arm all round, indicating the whole place, and much more. "Why is everything so different here?" he blurted out, a little conscious that he might have said something impolite.

Mr. Sun sat down in a chair and goggled at him through inky thick glasses.

“ We were the same, like you, like everyone else. We were worse. Our people came to you to learn.” He bowed deeply towards Vikram. “We had nothing, no food, no arms to defend. No friends, even. Then we work together; we build, slowly – we make many mistakes.” He nodded once again deeply, and everyone was very serious all of a sudden, and Dr. Yang took in his breath with a hiss. “ But now we are better. We modernize; we have hospitals, schools, granaries, theatres, shops, everything, even democracy! Now Tiger can’t hurt us!”

Mr. Sun beamed, and everyone smiled as well. Vikram didn’t know what to say, so he smiled and bowed in turn. At least he was better in one respect, he thought to himself. He knew how to say ‘democracy.’ After waving goodbye many times and bowing to return their interminable bows, Vikram set off home. From the top of the hill, he looked down at the place he had left behind, which stretched away into the distance. It was bustling and busy all right, but somehow soulless. He thought of what Mr. Sun had said. It would take a very long time and a lot of work to build all those schools, and hospitals, and granaries and shops and things. He would be exhausted by the time it was all done, and so would every man be in his village, if they all had to work like women. It would be pointless to do all that work just to keep a stupid tiger away from taking an occasional goat. He would have to think of a better way. In fact he had already. When he got back he would organize a Protest March against the tiger; they would all shout slogans, and wave flags, and have a very grand time, and see themselves in the evening news later. Yes, this way was far better than that of stupid Mr. Sun, and Dr. Yang, and Dr. Chung. He marched down to his village with a song on his lips.