



A KUNG FU FIGHTER

Short story by

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A Kung Fu Fighter

Sheranz is a Kung Fu Fighter, so said Raju and his description of Sheranz is spine chilling. Back home from school, Raju throws his bag and water bottle away, takes the stance of a kung fu fighter in front of me and gifts me with a hard punch. Though painful, I pretend not to have felt it. I am father and he is my son; a six year old son.

'Doesn't it hurt?' he asks me.

'No'. 'Do you call this a punch?'

'I'll show you.'

He takes a leap forward and punches me a second time.

'Ouch, it hurts.' I scream. I am getting angry. There was no need for him to punch me a second time.

Yes, this is how Sheranz punches and this is kung fu fighting.

He was just imitating Sheranz right now. If this was so fierce how would the punch of the original Sheranz be!

Sheranz was a terror at school - children hide away from him, none dare breathe in front of him, why even the class teacher is scared of him. He is Raju's friend. My wife and I are happy because our child is safe under the shelter of Sheranz.

Once a boy had kicked Raju and Sheranz was quick to respond. He scratched the boy's face until it bled. Though happy within, I put it differently to him.

'Is it right to scratch and hurt the boy, just because he kicked you?'

'Sheranz is my friend'

'So what?'

'If anyone hurts me Sheranz will pay them back with the same coin.'

Eager to see Sheranz my wife and I had been to Raju's school without informing him because if he knew that we are visiting his school he may not allow us to do so. 'Daddy, you don't come to school, let mummy come alone' he says.

'Why?'

'Daddy doesn't look good,' he says. I am annoyed.

'What are you saying son, daddy is looking handsome.' says mummy.

'No he does not look good. Mummy alone can come to my school.'

'Does mummy look good?' I asked him.

'Of course.'

Later when his mother is not around I ask him. "Why do you say daddy does not look good?'

'You look very old, your hair and your moustache, they don't look good. Thanai's daddy looks very handsome.'

So that's the reason why our visit to his school was not mentioned to him earlier. Walking towards his classroom after paying the fees in the office, we could not identify Raju in his class as all of them were looking alike in their uniform. May be Raju has seen us and is looking at us intently without making any noise. All little eyes were on us. A little girl's voice was heard, "Raju tumhari mummy aye hai."

Turning towards the sound of the girl, we saw Raju ducking himself under the desk.

During interval we asked him "who is Sheranz?"

Raju pointed his finger at a boy who was standing a little away and was curiously looking at us. Feeling self conscious and shy he ran away.

'Is that Sheranz? What a little boy is he; as small as our son !' I told my wife.

'What else did you expect?' my wife asked me.

How can this little one be a kung fu fighter?

I had a stout and masculine boy in my mind. How foolish of me! My imagination must have gone astray about a second standard student.

Thus Sheranz, the fear factor of the class, diminished to a little slim boy and the loss is

mine. I should not have gone to his school.

For my luck, Raju's kung fu fighting spirit did not last long. Now he is eloquent about another boy, Romid who is a very good singer. It seems he sings very well like Amitabh Bachchan.

'Amitabh Bachchan doesn't sing.' I told him.

'Why not, you heard the song *tune abhi dekha nahi* in the movie *Do Aur Do Panch*? It's sung by Amitabh Bachhan.'

'That is not Amitabh who sings it. It is Kishore Kumar.'

He did not believe it. He says it is none other than Amitabh who sings it in the movie; Kishore Kumar would have sung the song some other time. Anyway Romid according to him is a very good singer.

Immediately the figure of a man holding the mike, dancing to the tunes of his song came to my mind. But when the image of the kung fu fighter flashed in my mind, the charismatic singer disappeared. I should visualize my son's friends only through his eyes.

'Today Romid sang the song of *sher* in class.'

'Sher's song?'

'Yes the song sung by Amitabh Bachchan in Mr. Natwarlal.'

'Oh the song about the lion hunt, is that a song?'

'Um. What a nice song so well sung by Romid.'

There was no end to praising Romid for a long time and he was the main topic in all his conversations.

Romid comes alive as soon as Raju reaches home from school. The way he sings with the accompaniment of instruments, new hit songs reverberate in our ears...there is Kishore Kumar, Rafi and Yesudas. This goes on until bed time.

Then one day he no more talked about Romid. Raju, with his crayon set at hand was on the lookout for something. No song, no sound...That made me a little uneasy. What was wrong? When impatience took over me I enquired,

'Didn't Romid sing today?'

Indifferently he was continuing to look out for something on the table, tossing his notebooks and finally trying to pull out a page from his notebook.

'Haven't I told you not to tear pages from notebooks?' I shouted.

He stopped tearing but continued to hold the book still holding the page he was about to tear. There was mischief in his eyes. He wanted to quickly pull out a sheet from the book and run away soon as I turn my eyes away from him.

'Why do you need paper?'

'I want to draw pictures.'

'Where is your drawing book?'

'That book is for drawing in class. I want to draw at home too. Please buy me another drawing book.'

'Okay,' I agreed.

He took his hands away from the book. But within half an hour I was holding his hand and going to the book shop. Then for quite some time the house was adorned with pictures of animals.... cats, rats, dogs rabbits, and that is how we came to know about the artist, Thanai.

'Thanai is a very good artist. How well he draws pictures. *Sher* that he sketches looks like live one.'

He is talking about lion. Lion is his favorite animal.

'Can a *sher* hit an elephant?' or, '*Sher* is the king of the jungle and he has a big palace.'

'Don't be foolish,' I said, 'lions live in dens; only human kings live in palaces.' Raju's face was downcast.

'So lions don't have palaces?'

'No.'

He was disappointed and I felt sad for having destroyed his imaginary palace. What is wrong if a lion had a palace, especially if it adds colors to a child's imaginations?

'Thanai draws *sher* and its palace very well' said Raju .The days ahead were all meant to

praise Thanai and his creations.

Raju's crayons diminished to the size of capsules and were lying scattered and the pages of the drawing book turned into aero-planes and boats. In the remaining pages half done lions and their unfinished castles lay strewn.

'Our son will definitely not become an artist,' I said.

'Why? What is the reason?' my wife looks at one of the pages of the drawing book and says "This cat looks really good, see he has built a house for it, too.'

'That is Raju's lion.'

'Oh !'

Slowly as Thanai fades away behind the curtains of prominence, I was apprehensive and eager to know what would come next.

One day he says, 'Daddy I want a car.'

'You have lot of cars and you don't need anymore.'

'Not that type of car. I want a car that turns automatically on reaching the wall. I can play with it on top of the table, it will come back on reaching the edge of the table. It will not fall off at all.'

'You wont get such cars here, son.'

'Tapas has such cars.'

'Maybe somebody gifted him when they came from abroad.'

'Tapas has lots of such cars in his house. He has a train that runs on battery.'

So, Raju has gone to Tapas's house on his invitation.

'Let us see in the shop,' he said. 'We get small foreign cars over there so we may get this one too.'

An automatic car that comes back on reaching the wall edges has gifted me and my son with sleepless nights. Walking up and down the shops on this car hunt he said, 'Let us have a Thumbs up. I am tired.'

Allowing him to have one I refrained from drinking saying that I need not drink it just because Gavaskar drinks it.

'Maybe these cars are costly and that is why these shops do not sell them.'

I took pride in my son's knowledge of economics. He did not speak about those cars any more. He was content with taking his little cars up to the edge of the wall and bringing them back manually.

Slowly he grew to be very silent and I noticed this change. Nowadays he does not talk about the kung fu fighter, nor does he tell about Romid the singer, Tanai, the artist or about the cars of Tapas. He sits alone in the house after returning from school, deeply immersed in thought. He was growing thinner.

'I think he has worms in his tummy,' my wife said. 'We can give some medicines.'

Medicines gave no relief and eventually he was taken to a doctor who said he is fine and prescribed a tonic.

'Isn't he eating well?' I asked my wife.

'Of course he takes five *chappathis* for lunch, he packs it himself and brings back an empty lunchbox.'

He does not eat much for dinner but having five *chappathis* in the afternoon surprised me. Something is wrong somewhere.

'How many *chappathis* do you have in the afternoon?'

'Five *chappathis*.'

'You don't look as much as you eat.'

'I am quite strong like Muhammed Ali. I look like a muscle man.'" On saying this he exhibited his biceps to me and I pretended to be surprised and scared seeing it. I hoped he would continue to talk about Mohammed Ali and put an end to his silence. But he continued to be quiet, remaining on his own and then asked,

'Daddy why doesn't everyone have lot of money?'

Wisdom begins to dawn on my son. Did he tread under a *Bodhi* tree likie Gautama Budha?

The secret of Moahammed Ali's strength was discovered when my wife went to the school one day.

It was lunch time, children were all seated in their places and having lunch from their small lunch boxes. In one corner our little Mohammed Ali was also biting on to his *chappati*. There was a slim dark boy in front of him eating lunch from Raju's lunch box.

He had a guilty look on his face when he saw his mother. He quickly pushed away the other boy and continued eating as if he had no connection with him whatsoever. The other boy, on the other hand, not realizing that a threat in the form of his friend's mother was looming large above their heads, was looking aghast.

It was the class teacher who told her. Raju shares his lunch every day with Bansi, the son of the peon, a poor boy. He is the only one who is poor and all others come from affluent families in this school,' continued the teacher, Raju is the only one who is kind to him and all others hurt him.

In the evening when I heard about my son's sharing nature I was getting angry because he was lying to me. I called him and asked, "How many *chappatis* did you say you used to have?"

He became scared and said doubtfully, "five"

'Were you eating all the five?'

By now he realized that mummy has sold him out and said, 'no.'

'Then how many were you eating?'

'One.'

'Just one?'

I was shocked. I did not expect that. He was eating one and giving four to the other boy. That was the reason for his pulling down in weight.

I got so mad, he was lying to me. I took a ruler lying by and started beating him. Raju was trembling with pain. When I cooled down I stopped beating and I asked him. 'If at all you felt like giving, you could have given one or two and had the rest, isn't it? Why did you give four to him?'

He did not utter anything.

'Are you listening?' I shouted angrily. 'Why did you give four?'

'Daddy, will you beat me?' He was shivering.

'No, tell me.'

'I can have food even when I come back home, but Bansi, he won't be getting anything at home. All children hurt him, he is a poor boy.'

Raju continued crying. I never expected such an ending and he was sobbing bitterly.

Suddenly I felt ashamed of myself.

Raju was eloquent about Sheranz, the kung fu fighter, Romid, the singer, Tanai, the artist and Tapas, the car fleet owner, but he concealed the love and care he had towards this poor boy. I punished him with beating in return for his empathy and care towards fellow beings. I felt extremely sad.

While hunting for a good toy to buy to compensate for the painful thrashing Raju received, he said,

'I want to become a kung fu fighter when I become big.'

I did not know why he said that just at that moment. I said.

'Already you are one in your mind.'

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Translated from Malayalam by Usha Prabhakar.