

THE LOST CHILD

It was the festival of Spring. From the wintry shades of narrow lanes and alleys emerged a gaily clad humanity, thick as a crowd of bright-coloured rabbits issuing from a warren, and entering the flooded sea of sparkling silver sunshine outside the city gates, sped towards the fair. Some walked, some rode on horses, others sat, being carried in bamboo and bullock-carts. One little boy ran between his parent's legs, brimming over with life and laughter, as the joyous, smiling morning, with its open greetings and unashamed invitations to come away into the fields, full of flowers and songs.

'Come, child, come,' called his parents, as he lagged behind, arrested by the toys in the shops that lined the way.

He hurried towards his parents, his feet obedient to their call, his eyes still lingering on the receding toys. As he came to where they had stopped to wait for him, he could not suppress the desire of his heart, even though he well knew the old, cold stare of refusal in their eyes.

'I want that toy,' he pleaded.

His father looked at him red-eyed in his familiar tyrant's way. His mother, melted by the free spirit of the day, was tender, and giving him her finger to catch, said:

'Look, child, what is before you.'

The faint disgust of the child's unfulfilled desire had hardly been quelled in the heavy, pouting sob of a breath, 'M—o—th—e—r', when the pleasure of what was before him filled his eager eyes. They had left the dusty road on which they had walked so far to wend its weary way circuitously to the north, and had entered a footpath in a field.

It was a flowering mustard-field, pale, like melting gold, as it swept across miles and miles of even land, a river of yellow light, ebbing and falling with each fresh eddy of wild wind, and straying at places into broad, rich tributary streams, yet running in a constant sunny sweep towards the distant mirage of an ocean of silver light. Where it ended, on a side stood a dense group of low, mud-walled

houses put into relief both by the lower forms of a denser crowd of yellow-robed men and women and by high-pitched sequence of whistling, creaking, squeaking, roaring, humming noises that rose from it, across the groves, to the blue-throated sky like the weird, strange sound of Siva's mad laughter.

The child looked up to his father and mother, saturated with the shrill joy and wonder of this vast glory, and feeling that they, too, wore the evidence of this pure delight in their faces, left the footpath and plunged headlong into the field, prancing like a young colt, his small feet chiming with the fitful gusts of wind that came winnowing from the fragrance of more distant fields.

A group of dragon-flies were bustling about on their gauzy, purple wings, intercepting the flight of a lone black bee or butterfly in search of sweet perfume from the hearts of flowers. The child followed them in the air, with his gaze, till one of them would fold its wings and sit down, and he would try to catch it. But it would go, fluttering, flapping, hovering in the air, when he had almost caught it in his hands. One bold black bee, having evaded capture, sought to tempt him by whining round his ear, and nearly settled on his lips, when his mother made a cautionary call:

'Come, child, come; come on the footpath.'

He went towards his parents gaily, and walked abreast of them for a while, being, however, soon left behind, attracted by the little insects and worms along the footpath that were coming out teeming from their hiding-places to enjoy the sunshine.

'Come, child, come,' his parents called from the shade of a grove where they had seated themselves on the edge of a well. He ran towards them.

An old banyan here outstretched its powerful arms over the blossoming jack and jaman and neem and champā and serisha, and cast its shadows across beds of golden cassis and crimson gulmohur, as an old grand-mother spreads her skirts over her young ones. The blushing blossoms freely offered their adoration to the sun, however, in spite of their protecting chaperon, by half uncovering themselves; and the sweet perfume of their pollen mingled with the soft, cool breeze that came and went in little puffs, only to be wafted aloft by a stronger gush.

A shower of young flowers fell upon the child as he entered the grove, and, forgetting his parents, he began to gather the raining petals in his hands, but lo! he heard the cooing of the doves and ran towards his parents, shouting: 'The dove! The dove!' The raining petals dropped from his forgotten hand. A curious look was in his parents' faces, till a koel struck out a note of love and released their pent-up souls.

'Come, child, come,' they called to the child, who had now gone running in a wild caper round the banyan tree and, gathering him, they took the narrow, winding footpath which led to the fair from the mustard-fields.

As they neared the village, the child could see many other footpaths full of throngs, converging to the whirl-pool of the fair, and felt at once repelled and fascinated by the confusion of the world he was entering.

A sweetmeat-seller hawked, 'Gulab-jaman, rusgula, burfi, jalebi,' at the corner of the entrance, and a crowd pressed round his counter at the foot of an architecture of many-coloured sweets, decorated with leaves of silver and gold. The child stared open-eyed, and his mouth watered for the burfi that was his favourite sweet. 'I want that burfi,' he slowly mur-mured. But he half knew as he made the request that it would not be heeded, because his parents would say he was greedy. So, without waiting for an answer, he moved on.

A flower-seller hawked, 'A garland of gulmohur, a garland of gulmohur. The child seemed irresistibly drawn by the implacable sweetness of the scents that came floating on the wings of the languid air. He went towards the basket where the flowers lay heaped and half murmured, I want that garland,' but he well knew his parents would refuse to buy him these flowers be-cause they would say they were cheap. So, without waiting for an answer, he moved on.

A man stood holding a pole with yellow, red, green and purple balloons flying from it. The child was simply carried away by the rainbow glory of their silken colours, and he was possessed by an overwhelming desire to possess them all. But he well knew his parents would never buy him the balloons, because they would say he was too old to play with such toys. So he walked on farther.

A juggler stood playing a flute to a snake which coiled itself in a basket, its head raised in a graceful bend like the neck of a swan, while the music stole into its invisible ears like the gentle rippling of a miniature water-fall. The child went towards the juggler. But knowing his parents had forbidden him to hear such coarse music as the jugglers play, he proceeded farther.

There was a roundabout in full swing. Men, women and children, carried in a whirling motion, shrieked and cried with dizzy laughter. The child watched them intently going round and round, a pink blush of a smile on his face, his eyes rippling with the same movement, his lips half parted in amaze, till he felt he himself was being carried round. The ring seemed to go fiercely at first, then gradually it began to move less fast. Presently, the child, rapt, his finger in his mouth, beheld it stop. This time, before his over-powering love of his anticipated sensation of movement had been chilled by the fact of his parents' eternal denial, he made a bold request: 'I want to go on the roundabout, please, father, mother.'

There was no reply. He turned to look at his parents. They were not there, ahead of him. He turned to look on the side. They were not there. He looked behind. There was no sign of them.

A full, deep cry arose within his dry throat, and with a sudden jerk of his body he ran from where he stood, crying in red fear, 'Mother, father.' Tears rained down from his eyes, heavy and fierce, his flushed face was convulsed with fear. Panic-stricken, he ran to one side first then to the other, before and aft in all

directions, knowing not where to go. 'Mother, father,' he wailed, with a moist, shrill breath now, his throat being wet with the swallowing of his spittle. His yellow turban came untied, and his clothes, wet with perspiration, became muddy where the dust had mixed with the sweat of his body. His light frame seemed heavy as a mass of lead.

Having run to and fro in a sheer rage of running for a while, he stood defeated, his cries suppressed into sobs. At little distance on the green grass he could see, through his filmy eyes, men and women talking. He tried to look intensively among the patches of bright yellow clothes, but there was no sign of his father and mother among these people, who seemed to laugh and talk just for the sake of laughing and talking. He ran hotly again, this time to a shrine to which people seemed to be crowding. Every little inch of space here was congested with men, but he ran through people's legs, his little sob lingering, 'Mother, father.' Near the entrance of the temple, however, the crowd became very thick: men jostled each other—heavy men, with flashing, murderous eyes and hefty shoulders. The poor child struggled to carve a way between their feet, but, knocked to and fro by their brutal paws, he might have been trampled underfoot, had he not shrieked at the highest pitch of his voice, 'F—ather, mother.' A man in the surging crowd heard his groan, and, stooping with very great difficulty, lifted him up in his arms.

'How did you get here, child ? Whose baby are you ?' the man asked as he steered clear of the mass.

The child wept more bitterly than ever now and only cried, I want my mother, I want my father.'

The man tried to soothe him by taking him up to the roundabout. 'Will you have a lift on the horses?' he gently asked as he approached the ring.

The child's throat tore into a thousand shrill sobs and he only shouted, 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

The man headed towards the place where the juggler still played on the flute to the dancing cobra.

'Listen to that nice music, child,' he pleaded.

But the child shut his ears with his fingers and shouted his double-pitched strain, I want my mother, I want my father.'

The man took him near the balloons, thinking the bright colours of the balls would distract the child's attention and quieten him. 'Would you like a rainbow-coloured balloon ?' he persuasively asked.

But the child turned his eyes from the flying balloons and just sobbed, 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

The man, still importunate in his kindly desire to make the child happy, bore him to the gate where the flower-seller stood. 'Look! Can you smell these nice flowers, child ? Would you like a garland to put round your neck?'

The child turned his nose away from the basket and reiterated his sob, 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

Thinking to humour his disconsolate find by a gift of sweets, the man took him to the counter of the sweet-shop. 'What sweets would you like, child?' he asked.

The child turned his face from the sweet-shop and only sobbed, 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

- Mulk Raj Anand

About the Story

'The Lost Child' deals with the experience of a child who goes to a fair with his parents and wants many things. Then the child gets lost, and refuses to accept any of the things it had earlier wanted so much. Now the child only insists, 'I want my mother, I want my father.' Perhaps, the child is a symbol of human being lost in this world. As Guru Nanak says, 'We are all children lost in the world fair.'

The story is written by Mulk Raj Anand, a famous Indian English novelist. He was given the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1972.

Glossary

gaily clad humanity: colourfully dressed people going to the fair.

warren: piece of land where rabbits breed or abound.

brimming over with life and laughter: overflowing with joy and laughter.

arrested by the toys: The child stopped, attracted by toys.

red-eyed in his familiar tyrant's way: As usual, his father looked stern and harsh with red, angry eyes.

melted by the free spirit of the day: softened by the gay and happy atmosphere.

quelled: crushed.

mirage: illusion produced by atmospheric conditions.

weird: supernatural.

prancing like a young colt: springing like a young horse.

teeming: abundant.

offered their adoration to the sun: worshipped and paid their homage to the sun.

chaperon:(here) the protective covering of the banyan tree.

running in wild caper: running, leaping and jumping in a playful and carefree manner.

architecture of many-coloured sweets: piles of sweets of many colours arranged on top of each other.

double-pitched strain: high-pitched and shrill cry of the child repeatedly asking for his parents.

disconsolate find: the weeping and sad child whom it was difficult to console.

aft: near or towards the back

shrieked: cried with pain

trampled: crushed

spittle : Saliva, liquid that forms in the mouth

importunate: asking for things many times

hefty : big and heavy

tyrant : dictator

reiterate : repeat, say again

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

1. The father looked at the child red-eyed in his familiar tyrant's way because-
 - a. the child wanted everything at the fair.
 - b. the child was lost.
 - c. his wife asked him to buy sweets for the child.
 - d. it was raining.
2. The child was panic-stricken because-
 - a. he had lost his father and mother.
 - b. he had been scolded by his father.
 - c. a kind-hearted person had given everything he desired.
 - d. his parents had deserted him
3. The lost child in the story 'The Lost child' is a symbol of-
 - a. a human being lost in this World.
 - b. the unfulfilled desires of a human being.
 - c. a human being who is never satisfied.
 - d. a human being who is spiritual in his approach.

(B) Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words each:

1. What the story 'The Lost Child' is about?
2. What does the lost child represent?
3. Who is the disconsolate find in the story 'The Lost Child'?
4. What does the phrase "guilty clad humanity" mean?
5. What was the attitude of the father towards the demands of the child?

(C) Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words each:

1. What made the father angry with his child?
2. What did the child want after he had lost his father and mother?
3. What happened as the child entered the grove?
4. What did the child do to find his parents?

(D) Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. Enumerate the things that the child wants. Do the parents fulfil his desire?
2. Bring out the symbolic significance of the title of the story 'The Lost Child'.

(E) Say whether the following statements are True or False. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for False in the bracket:

1. All the desires of the child are fulfilled towards the end of the story in 'The Lost Child'. []
2. The parents in 'The Lost Child' are generous and fulfil all his demands. []
3. The story 'The Lost Child' is written by Mulk Raj Anand. []
4. The lost child gets pleased because people fulfil his demands by offering him several things. []