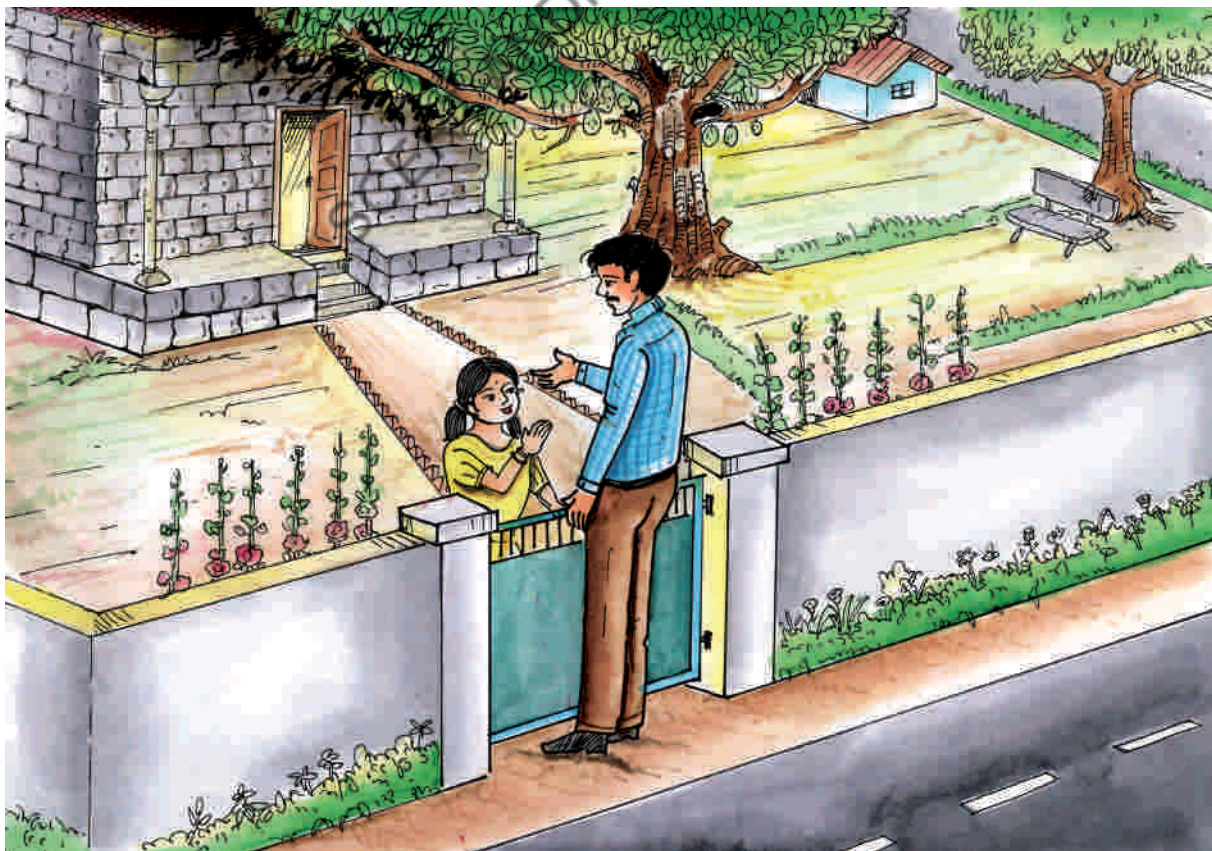


Can't Climb Trees Any More

He stood on the grass verge by the side of the road and looked over the garden wall at the old house. It hadn't changed much. The old house built with solid blocks of granite wasn't altered at all. But there was a new outhouse, and there were fewer trees. He was glad to see that the jackfruit tree still stood at the side of the building casting its shade on the wall. He remembered his grandmother saying: 'A blessing rests on the house where the shadow of a tree falls.' And so the present owners must also be receiving the tree's blessings. At the spot where he stood there had once been a turnstile, and as a boy he would swing on it, going round and round until he was quite dizzy. Now the turnstile had gone, the opening walled up. Tall hollyhocks grew on the other side of the wall.

'What are you looking at?'

It was a disembodied voice at first. Moments later a girl stood framed between dark red hollyhocks staring at the man. She was only twelve or thirteen, slim and dark, with lively eyes and long black hair.



‘I’m looking at the house,’ he said.

‘Why? Do you want to buy it?’

‘Is it your house?’

‘It’s my father’s.’

‘And what does your father do?’

‘He’s only a colonel.’

‘Only a colonel?’

‘Well, he should have been a brigadier by now.’

The man burst out laughing.

‘It’s not funny,’ she said. ‘Even Mummy says he should have been a brigadier.’

It was on the tip of his tongue to make a witty remark (‘Perhaps that’s why he’s still a Colonel’), but he did not want to give offence. They stood on either side of the wall, appraising each other.

‘Well,’ she said finally. ‘If you don’t want to buy the house, what are you looking at?’

‘I used to live here once.’

‘Oh!’

‘Twenty-five years ago. As a boy. As a young man.... And then my grandmother died, and we sold the house and went away.’

She was silent for a while, taking in this information. Then she said, ‘And you’d like to buy it back now, but you don’t have the money?’ He did not look very prosperous.

‘No, I wasn’t thinking of buying it back, wanted to see it again, that’s all. How long have you lived in it?’

‘Only three years,’ she smiled. She’d been eating a melon, and there was still juice in the corners of her mouth.

‘Would you like to come in and look more closely?’

‘Wouldn’t your parents mind?’

‘They’ve gone to the club.’ They won’t mind. I’m allowed to bring my friends home.’

‘Even elderly friends like me?’

‘How old are you?’

‘Oh, just middle aged, but feeling young today.’ And to prove it he decided he’d climb over the wall instead of going round to the gate. He got up on the wall all right, but had to rest there, breathing heavily.

‘Middle-aged man on the flying trapeze,’ he muttered to himself.

‘I’ll help you,’ she said, and gave him her hand.

He slithered down into a flower-bed, shattering the stem of a hollyhock.

As they walked across the grass he spotted a stone bench under a mango tree. It was the bench on which his grandmother used to rest, when she was tired of pruning rose bushes and bougainvillaea.

‘Let’s just sit here,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to go inside.’

She sat beside him on the bench. It was March, and the mango tree was in blossom. A sweet, rather heavy fragrance drenched the garden.

They were silent for some time. The man closed his eyes and remembered other times - the music of a piano, the chiming of a grandfather’s clock, the constant twitter of budgerigars on the veranda, his grandfather cranking up the old car....

‘I used to climb the jackfruit tree,’ he said, opening his eyes. ‘I didn’t like the jackfruit, though. Do you?’

‘It’s all right in pickles.’

‘I suppose so.... The tree was easy to climb; I spent a lot of time in it.’

‘Do you want to climb it again? My parents won’t mind.’

‘No, no. Not after climbing the garden wall. Let’s just sit here for a few minutes and talk. I mention the jackfruit tree because it was my favourite place. Do you see that thick branch stretching out over the roof? Half way along it there’s a small hollow in which I used to keep some of my treasures.’

‘What kind of treasures?’

‘Oh, nothing very valuable. Marbles I’d won. A book I wasn’t supposed to read. A few old coins I’d collected. Things came and went. I was a bit of a crow, you know, collecting bright things and putting them away. There was my grandfather’s Iron Cross. Well, not my grandfather’s exactly, because he was British and the Iron Cross’ was a German decoration awarded for bravery during the War - the first World War - when my grandfather fought in France. He got it from a German soldier.’

‘Dead or alive?’

‘I beg your pardon? Oh, you mean the German. I never asked. Dead, I suppose. Or perhaps he was a prisoner. I never asked Grandfather. Isn’t that strange?’

‘And the Iron Cross? Do you still have it?’

‘No’, he said, looking her in the eyes. ‘I left it in the jackfruit tree.’

‘You left it in the tree?’

‘Yes, I was so excited at the time, packing and saying goodbye to people and thinking about the ship I was going to sail on that I simply forgot all about it.’

She was silent, considering, her finger on her lips, her gaze fixed on the jackfruit tree. Then, quietly, she said, ‘It may still be there. In the hollow in the branch.’

‘Yes’, he said. ‘It’s twenty-five years, but it may still be there. Unless someone else found it...’

‘Would you like to go and look?’

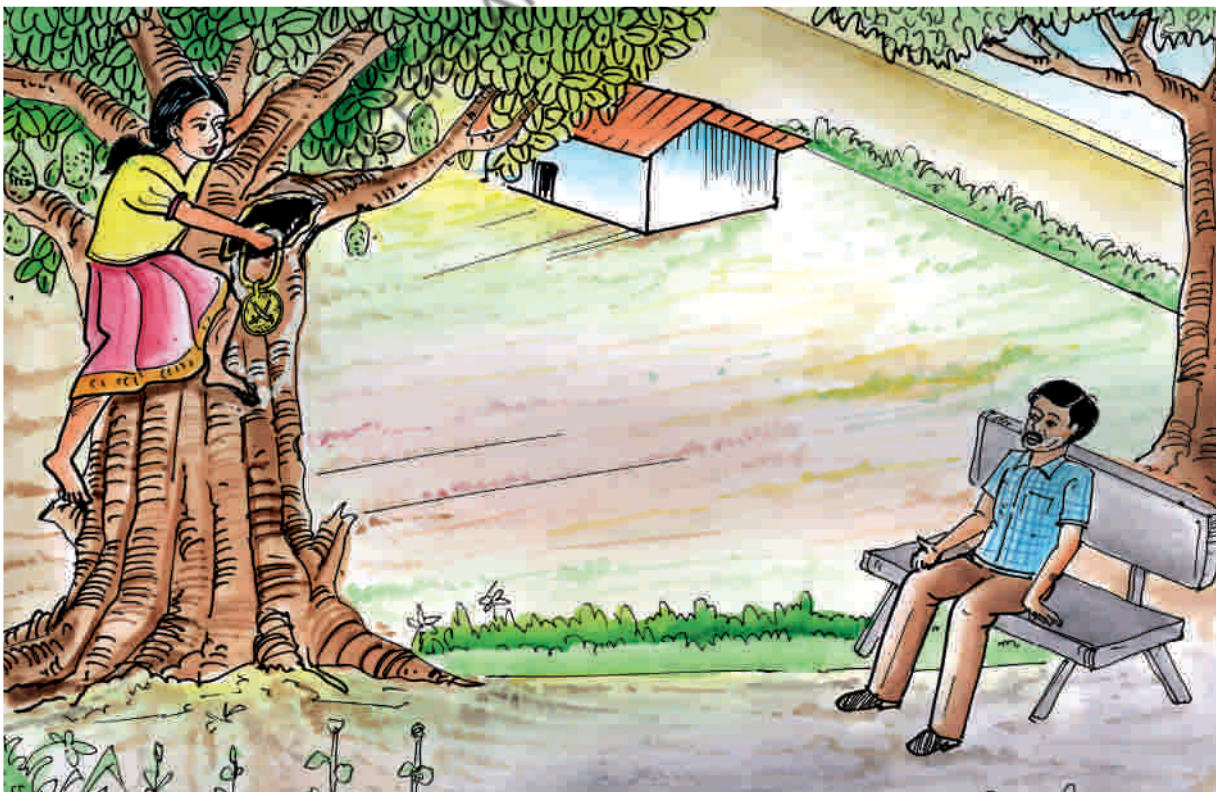
‘I can’t climb trees any more.’

‘If you can’t, I will go and see. You just sit here and wait for me.’

She sprang up and ran across the grass, swift and sweet of limb. Soon she was in the jackfruit tree, crawling along the projecting branch. A warm wind brought little eddies of dust along the road. Summer was in the air....

‘I’ve found it!’ she cried. ‘I’ve found something!’

And now, barefoot, she ran breathlessly towards him, in her outstretched hand a rusty old medal.



He took it from her and turned it over on his palm.

‘Is it the Iron Cross?’ she asked eagerly.

‘Yes’, he said, ‘this is it.’

‘Now I know why you came. You wanted to see if it was still in the tree.’

‘You may be right. I’m not really sure why I came. But you can keep the Cross. You found it, after all.’

‘No, you keep it. It’s yours.’

‘But it could have remained in the tree for another twenty-five years if you hadn’t climbed up to look for it.’

‘But if you hadn’t come back again....’

‘On the right day, at the right time, and with the right person’, he said, getting up and placing the medal in her hands. ‘It wasn’t the Cross I came for. It was my youth.’

She didn’t understand that, but she walked with him to the gate and stood there gazing after him as he walked away. Where the road turned, he looked back and waved to her. Then he quickened his steps and moved briskly towards the bus stop. There was sprightliness in his step, and something cried aloud in his heart.

Dark dancing eyes, melon sweet lips, lissome limbs....

The mango scented summer breeze made the blood course in his veins, and he forgot, for a moment, that he couldn’t climb trees any more....

- *Ruskin Bond*

About the author

Ruskin Bond was born in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, in 1934. He wrote a number of short stories, essays, novels, and many books for children. *The Room on the Roof* was his first novel, written when he was seventeen. It received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. In 1992, he received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his short story collection, *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, given by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Literature. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1999 for contributions to children's literature.





Glossary

turnstile (<i>n</i>)	:	a mechanical gate consisting of revolving horizontal arms fixed to a vertical post, allowing only one person at a time to pass through
dizzy (<i>adj</i>)	:	having a sensation of spinning around and losing one's balance
hollyhock (<i>n</i>)	:	a tall garden plant with large showy flowers
disembodied (<i>adj</i>)	:	(of a sound) lacking any obvious physical source
trapeze (<i>n</i>)	:	a swing used by circus acrobats
bougainvillea (<i>n</i>)	:	an ornamental shrubby climbing plant widely cultivated in the tropics, with bright coloured flowers
budgerigar (<i>n</i>)	:	a small bird belonging to the parrot family
eddy (<i>n</i>)	:	(pl. eddies) a circular movement of dust (here)
sprightliness (<i>n</i>)	:	liveliness and energy in action
lissome (<i>adj</i>)	:	slim; graceful
course (<i>v</i>)	:	(of liquid) flow

Answer the following questions.

1. What is your opinion about the theme of the story?
2. The middle-aged man remembers his joyous days of youth. What are the different words/ phrases used in the story (for example, dark dancing eyes; swift and sweet of limbs) to show the characteristics of the youth?
3. 'A blessing rests on the house where the shadow of a tree falls.' And so the present owners must also be receiving the tree's blessings. What does the narrator's grandmother mean by this statement?
4. Are the grandmother and Chief Seattle expressing the same feelings about trees and nature? Why?



Project Work

Look at the picture. Our water resources are getting polluted every day. If we do not care enough to prevent pollution and save water there is going to be an acute scarcity of drinking water.



I. Visit five houses in your locality and collect the following information.

1. **Number of members in the family.**
 - a. adults
 - b. children
2. **The average quantity of water used in the household (in litres).**
 - a. for drinking and cooking food
 - b. for washing clothes and cleaning the house
 - c. for cattle
 - d. for gardening
3. **The average quantity of water wasted in the household (in litres).**
 - a. for drinking and cooking food
 - b. for washing clothes and cleaning the house
 - c. for cattle
 - d. for gardening
4. **What are the water sources for the household and what is the average quantity of water used from these sources.**
 - a. well in the household
 - b. public well
 - c. water from public taps
 - d. river, pond, lake, etc.
5. **Does the ground water in the locality get polluted? If so, the sources.**
 - a. domestic sewage
 - b. industrial waste water
 - c. agricultural waste water
 - d. construction site run-off
 - e. urban run-off



II. Work in three groups and make reports as suggested below. Present all the reports before the whole class.

Group A

The quantity of water used by the households in the locality from various water sources and how the usage can be minimised for conserving drinking water.

Group B

The water sources in the locality, how the water gets polluted and how it can be prevented.

Group C

What measures can be taken for conserving water and preventing pollution of water?

Self Assessment

How well have I understood this unit?

Read and tick (✓) in the appropriate box.

Indicators	Yes	Somewhat	No
I read and understood the text:			
A. What Is Man Without the Beasts?			
B. The River			
C. Can't Climb Trees Any More			
I was able to work out the combinations with the words given under 'Vocabulary'.			
I was able to pick out the words that denote 'movement' from the speech 'What is Man Without the Beasts?'			
I was able to identify the 'verb phrase', in the given passage under 'Grammar'.			
I was able to identify the auxiliaries and the main verb in the given verb phrase.			
I was able to rewrite the sentences according to the directions given under 'Writing'.			
I was able to understand the features of a good speech.			
I listened to and understood 'Earth Song' and answered the questions.			