Learn English Through Stories

Adapted and modified by

Kulwant Singh Sandhu

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Laughter

“You want me to laugh?”

He felt lonely and ill in the empty class-room, all the boys going home, Dan Seed, James Misippo, Dick Corcoran, all of them walking along the Southern Pacific tracks, laughing and playing, and this insane idea of Miss Wissig’s, making him sick.

“Yes.”

The severe lips, the trembling, the eyes, such pathetic melancholy. “But I do not want to laugh.”

It was strange. The whole world, the turn of things, the way they came about.

“Laugh.”

The increasing tenseness, electrical, her stiffness, the nervous movements of her body and her arms, the cold she made, and the illness in his blood.

“But why?”

Why? Everything tied up, everything graceless and ugly, the caught mind, something in a trap, no sense, no meaning.

“As a punishment. You laughed in class, now as a punishment you must laugh for an hour, all alone, by yourself. Hurry, you have already wasted four minutes.”

It was disgusting; it wasn’t funny at all, being kept after school, being asked to laugh. There was no sense in the idea. What should he laugh about? A fellow couldn’t just laugh. There had to be something of that kind, something amusing or pompous, something comical. This was so strange, because of her manner, the way she looked at him, the subtlety; it was frightening. What did she want of him? And the smell of school, the oil in the floor, chalk dust, the smell of the idea, children gone; loneliness, the sadness.

“I am sorry I laughed.”

The flower bending, ashamed. He felt sorry, he was not merely bluffing; he *was* sorry, not for himself but for her. She was a young girl, a substitute teacher, and there was that sadness in her, so far away and so hard to understand; it came with her each morning and he had laughed at it, it was comical, something she said, the way she said it, the way she stared at everyone, the way she moved. He hadn’t felt like laughing at all, but all of a sudden he had laughed and she had looked at him and he had looked into her

face, and for a moment that vague communion, then the anger, the hatred, in her eyes. “You will stay in after school.” He hadn’t wanted to laugh, it simply happened, and he was sorry, he was ashamed, she ought to know, he was telling her. Jiminy crickets.

“You are wasting time. Begin laughing.”

Her back was turned and she was erasing words from the blackboard: *Africa, Cairo, the pyramids, the sphinx, Nile;* and the figures 1865, 1914. But the tenseness, even with her back turned; it was still in the class-room, emphasized because of the emptiness, magnified, made precise, his mind and her mind, their grief, side by side, conflicting; why? He wanted to be friendly; the morning she had entered the classroom he had wanted to be friendly; he felt it immediately, her strangeness, the remoteness, so why had he laughed? Why did everything happen in a false way? Why should he be the one to hurt her, when really he had wanted to be her friend from the beginning?

“I don’t want to laugh.”

Defiance and at the same time weeping, shameful weeping in his voice. By what right should he be made to destroy in himself an innocent thing? He hadn’t meant to be cruel; why shouldn’t she be able to understand? He began to feel hatred for her stupidity, her dullness, the stubbornness of her will. I will not laugh, he thought; she can call Mr. Caswell and have me whipped; I will not laugh again. It was a mistake. I had meant to cry; something else, anyway; I hadn’t meant it. I can stand a whipping, golly Moses, it hurts, but not like this; I’ve felt that strap on my behind, I know the difference.

Well, let them whip him, what did he care? It stung and he could feel the sharp pain for days after, thinking about it, but let them go ahead and make him bend over, he wouldn’t laugh.

He saw her sit at her desk and stare at him, and for crying out loud, she looked sick and startled, and the pity came up to his mouth again, the sickening pity for her, and why was he making so much trouble for a poor substitute teacher he really liked, not an old and ugly teacher, but a nice small girl who was frightened from the first?

“Please laugh.”

And what humiliation, not commanding him, begging him now, begging him to laugh when he didn’t want to laugh. What should a fellow do, honestly; what should a fellow do that would be right, by his own will, not accidentally, like the wrong things? And what did she mean? What pleasure could she get out of hearing him laugh? What a stupid world, the strange feelings of people, the secretiveness, each person hidden within himself, wanting something and

always getting something else, wanting to give something and always giving something else. Well, he would. Now he would laugh, not for himself but for her. Even if it sickened him, he would laugh. He wanted to know the truth, how it was. She wasn't *making* him laugh, she was *asking* him, *begging* him to laugh. He didn't know how it was, but he wanted to know. He thought, Maybe I can think of a funny story, and he began to try to remember all the funny stories he had ever heard, but it was very strange, he couldn't remember a single one. And the other funny things, the way Annie Gran walked; gee, it wasn't funny anymore; and Henry Mayo making fun of Hiawatha, saying the lines wrong; it wasn't funny either. It used to make him laugh until his face got red and he lost his breath, but now it was a dead and a pointless thing, *by the big sea waters, by the big sea waters, came the mighty*, but gee, it wasn't funny; he couldn't laugh about it, golly Moses. Well, he would just laugh, any old laugh, be an actor, ha, ha, ha. God, it was hard, the easiest thing in the world for him to do, and now he couldn't make a little giggle.

Somehow he began to laugh, feeling ashamed and disgusted. He was afraid to look into her eyes, so he looked up at the clock and tried to keep on laughing, and it was startling, to ask a boy to laugh for an hour, at nothing, to beg him to laugh without giving him a reason. But he would do it, maybe not an hour, but he would try, anyway; he would do something. The funniest thing was his voice, the falseness of his laughter, and after a while it got to be really funny, a comical thing, and it made him happy because it made him really laugh, and now he was laughing his real way, with all his breath, with all his blood, laughing at the falseness of his laughter, and the shame was going away because this laughter was not fake, and it was the truth, and the empty class-room was full of his laughter and everything seemed all right, everything was splendid, and two minutes had gone by.

And he began to think of really comical things everywhere, the whole town, the people walking in the streets, trying to look important, but he knew, they couldn't fool him, he knew how important they were, and the way they talked, big business, and all of it pompous and fake, and it made him laugh, and he thought of the preacher at the Presbyterian church, the fake way he prayed, *O God, if it is your will*, and nobody believing in prayers, and the important people with big automobiles, Cadillacs and Packards, speeding up and down the country, as if they had some place to go, and the public band concerts, all that fake stuff, making him really laugh, and the big boys running after the big girls because of the heat, and the streetcars going up and down the city with never more than two passengers, that was funny, those big cars carrying an old lady and a man with a moustache, and he laughed until he lost his breath and his face got red, and suddenly all the shame was gone and he

was laughing and looking at Miss Wissig, and then bang: jiminy Christmas, tears in her eyes. For God's sake, he hadn't been laughing at her. He had been laughing at all those fools, all those fool things they were doing day after day, all that falseness. It was disgusting. He was always wanting to do the right thing, and it was always turning out the other way. He wanted to know why, how it was with her, inside, the part that was secret, and he had laughed for her, not to please himself, and there she was, trembling, her eyes wet and tears coming out of them, and her face in agony, and he was still laughing because of all the anger and yearning and disappointment in his heart, and he was laughing at all the pathetic things in the world, the things good people cried about, the stray dogs in the streets, the tired horses being whipped, stumbling, the timid people being smashed inwardly by the fat and cruel people, fat inside, pompous, and the small birds, dead on the sidewalk, and the misunderstandings everywhere, the everlasting conflict, the cruelty, the things that made man a malignant thing, a vile growth, and the anger was changing his laughter and tears were coming into his eyes. The two of them in the empty class-room, naked together in their loneliness and bewilderment, brother and sister, both of them wanting the same cleanliness and decency of life, both of them wanting to share the truth of the other, and yet, somehow, both of them alien, remote and alone.

He heard the girl stifle a sob and then everything turned up-side-down, and he was crying, honest and truly crying, like a baby, as if something had really happened, and he hid his face in his arms, and his chest was heaving, and he was thinking he did not want to live; if this was the way it was, he wanted to be dead.

He did not know how long he cried, and suddenly he was aware that he was no longer crying or laughing, and that the room was very still. What a shameful thing. He was afraid to lift his head and look at the teacher. It was disgusting.

"Ben."

The voice calm, quiet, solemn; how could he ever look at her again? "Ben."

He lifted his head. Her eyes were dry and her face seemed brighter and more beautiful than ever.

"Please dry your eyes. Have you a handkerchief?"

"Yes."

He wiped the moisture from his eyes, and blew his nose. What a sickness in the earth. How bleak everything was. "How old are you, Ben?"

“Ten.”

“What are you going to do? I mean—”

“I don’t know.”

“Your father?”

“He is a tailor.”

“Do you like it here?”

“I guess so.”

“You have brothers, sisters?”

“Three brothers, two sisters.”

“Do you ever think of going away? Other cities?”

It was amazing, talking to him as if he were a grown person, getting into his secret.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. New York, I guess. The old country, maybe.”

“The old country?”

“Milan. My father’s city.”

“Oh.”

He wanted to ask her about herself, where she had been, where she was going; he wanted to be grown up, but he was afraid. She went to the cloak-room and brought out her coat and hat and purse, and began to put on her coat.

“I will not be here tomorrow. Miss Shorb is well again. I am going away.”

He felt very sad, but he could think of nothing to say. She tightened the belt of her coat and placed her hat on her head, smiling, golly Moses, what a world, first she made him laugh, then she made him cry, and now this. And it made him feel so lonely for her. Where was she going? Wouldn’t he ever see her again?

“You may go now, Ben.”

And there he was looking up at her and not wanting to go, there he was wanting to sit and look at her. He got up slowly and went to the cloak-room for his cap. He walked to the door, feeling ill with loneliness, and turned to look at her for the last time.

“Good-bye, Miss Wissig.”

“Good-bye, Ben.”

And then he was running lickety-split across the school grounds, and the young substitute teacher was standing in the yard, following him with her eyes. He didn’t know what to think, but he knew that he was feeling very sad and that he was afraid to turn around and see if she was looking at him. He thought, If I hurry, maybe I can catch up with Dan Seed and Dick Corcoran and the other boys, and maybe I’ll be in time to see the freight train leaving town. Well, nobody would know, anyway. Nobody would ever know what had happened and how he had laughed and cried.

He ran all the way to the Southern Pacific tracks, and all the boys were gone, and the train was gone, and he sat down beneath the eucalyptus trees. The whole world, in a mess.

Then he began to cry again.