

POOH STICKS

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Old Ben's inability to read or write had been neither here nor there to his grandson. Being illiterate seems perfectly normal before you are five years old. Their friendship had been based on trust and understanding – and, of course, love; but let's not get sloppy about it. They had treated each other with tolerance and dignity and had never had any reason to lie to one another.

Then a day came when each of them realized he was keeping something important from the other. As it happens, each of them already knew the other's secret but felt that to speak about it would be indelicate. Both of these lies of omission were prompted by the one really acceptable excuse for lying, the fear of hurting a friend; but they were not treating either of their consciences gently.

Little Ben had been not much more than one-year-old when his grandfather had introduced him to the absorbing ritual of Pooh Sticks. At the bottom of his parents' garden there was a slow-moving stream spanned by an elderly wooden bridge. The bridge's reason for existing was no longer obvious. If you wanted to cross the stream, there was a much safer, uglier bridge a short distance away. Almost no one ever used the Pooh Sticks bridge except the two Bens. It was their favourite place. If you have something overdue to say to a friend, an ideal time to get it off your chest is when the two of you are leaning dangerously over opposite sides of a bridge looking at each other beneath its arch. You are both the same way up but the rest of the world is upside down, suspended beneath your bottoms; and time is suspended with it. It is reassuringly intimate, and the best of all times for broaching matters of great delicacy.

It was little Ben's turn to drop the stick in the water and count – a fairly recently acquired skill – while his grandfather waited for it to appear on his side of the bridge. He dropped it carefully to make sure it got lodged behind a rock.

After reaching twenty, he stopped counting and said, "Looks like it's stuck."

"Maybe," said Old Ben, "but it may unstuck if we wait a bit longer."

This was Little Ben's moment. With that exaggerated air of nonchalance, which five-year-old boys assume when risking everything by revealing a secret, he said, "I've been learning to read a bit."

"That's good," said Old Ben. "Very good. Wish I'd got around to it myself. Never seemed to have the time, somehow. Too busy making money. Got a lot of money in the bank now. Don't have much use for it. No books on the shelf though. Wish I had some use for them. Glad to hear you aren't going to make the same mistake."

Little Ben knew he was the only person in the world privileged to share his friend's pain. Prodding vaguely, he dredged up another white lie.

"It's not important. Just something they sort of expect me to do now that I'm going to proper school. Thought I might as well tell you, though."

Old Ben marveled at his friend's tact. He could only guess how excited the boy must really be about entering a magic world, which was forever beyond his own reach.

"Sure, sure; but you keep at it, Ben. Never know when it might come in handy. Maybe you'll be able to read stuff for me sometimes. They teaching you to write as well?"

"Well, only just. I mean, we've only just started. I can write my name. So I suppose I could write your name too, since it's the same as mine. If you wanted me to, that is."

The Pooh Stick was firmly jammed; they both knew it was not going to get free on its own. It was Old Ben's turn.

"Supposing I had to move out for some reason. I mean, not live here any more. If that happened we could still play together. Here at the river, I mean. Couldn't we?"

"Sure," said Little Ben. Then, after a delicate pause, "When do you think you might have to go?"

"Well, pretty soon, I guess. Your Mom and Dad are too busy to have me on their hands all the time. Especially now that . . . hey, is that stick never going to free itself? Anyway, it's high time I spent some of that money on something. Might as well pay someone else to look after me for a change."

Old Ben prodded ineffectually at a rock, carefully avoiding the Pooh Stick, before adding, "You could come and see me a lot, of course. If you wanted to, that is."

"That would be great," said Little Ben.

The two-way confessional was over. Absolution had been sought and given. It had been unnecessary to reveal either the ecstasy of discovering literacy in preparation for adulthood, or the agony of losing functional control on the way to second childhood.

As they returned to the house, forgetting the Pooh Stick, which had served its purpose, the old man said, "I won't be able to take all my stuff with me, of course. Just as well; lot of old junk, most of it. Come to think of it, there's one thing you might like to take off my hands. Since you're learning to read and write, that is."

He dragged an exquisite little writing desk out of his closet.

“There you are”, he said, “this belonged to *my* grandpa. Supposed to be hundreds of years old. It’s called an excreta, or something. Never been much use to me. It can be yours now, if you want it.”

Little Ben’s height doubled. It was the first beautiful, grown-up thing he had ever owned. He ran his finger lovingly over the elaborately carved, Elizabethan oak and something even more wonderful happened. A section of the carving swung open to reveal a sheaf of yellow pages.

“It’s a secret hiding place! Did you know about it?”

“No, it never did that for me. It must like you.”

Old Ben pulled the pages out and said, “Here’s your big chance, then. See if you can read what’s written on them.” No sooner had he said it than he wished he hadn’t.

Little Ben looked proudly at the faded writing. It did not look like anything he had ever seen before.

“I can’t read *any* of it,” he said miserably, fighting back tears of frustration.

Old Ben understood his grandson’s feeling of inadequacy. He had been there many times. “Never mind. It’s probably in some foreign language. No use to anyone anymore. Probably never was.”

Then, seeing that his friend still felt that he had failed his first big test, he added, “They would make great boats though, wouldn’t they?”

An hour later they were on the bridge again, launching a parchment armada. The little boats sailed bravely; but not for long. The first to sink was the title page. As it went down the centuries old ink dissolved. Only

the old man and the boy had been privy to the brief disclosure of its message; but its secret had remained safe from them. Now it was lost forever.

What it had been trying to say for four centuries, in a script which had defeated both of them, was this . . .

Loues Labour Uonne
A Comedie by Vm. Shakffear.