

Chapter 2

The Meeting

Susan stopped at the edge of the trail that led down to the river's edge, and felt more nervousness rise up in her heart, nervousness that was tickled then eased by her grandfather's story and the song she had sung to the flowers. It occurred to her that the voice she thought she'd heard from under the bridge could have been an attempt to sing. To sing along with her song. At least it seemed to her that that is how a voice would sound if it was the voice of a troll who hadn't spoken to anyone in a long time.

And something had moved under the bridge, she was pretty sure of that. Or could it have been some stick floating down the river, that had hanged up against the rocks piled on the shore at just that moment? She hesitated, too determined to go away until another day, yet too unsure of what she might find under the bridge. After a while she grew aware that she had been standing in the same place for quite a while, so she took a quick look around her, to see if anyone else was nearby in the park, and to see if anyone had noticed her peculiar behavior.

She wondered what her next move should be. Still, her feet did not move. She looked down at a patch of flowers, which she was almost standing in, and a lively breeze came up that blew them strongly to and fro. Without warning, the breeze grew into a gust of wind, caught the edge of the straw hat she was wearing, blew it off her head, and then made it dance a little dance down to the edge of the river, where it spun around twice before setting on the water's edge. For a moment it continued to spin in a little whirlpool created by the river's current, where it turned back on itself at an outcropping of rocks.

Another gust of wind pushed the hat out of the whirlpool at the water's edge, and set it sailing down the river in the straighter stronger current away from shore. The hat had a flat top, and a flat circular brim, the kind called a boaters hat, and it had a blue, white, and purple ribbon wrapped around the top, which trailed off into a tail of ribbon. This ribbon tail was now the rudder of this little ship as it started down the river.

Worried about the hat, Susan forgot her nervousness of following the trail to the water's edge, and quickly hopped down it to see if she could rescue her hat. For a moment she felt angry at the river for taking her hat away, then realized that it wasn't the river's fault her hat had landed on it. She had always considered the river a friend, and she had a feeling it might help her get her hat back.

Halfway to the bridge on the trail, she carefully picked her way over some rocks at the river's edge, and reached out just a moment too late as her hat broke free of a piece of wood that had detained it. Leaning out to reach for the hat made her lose her balance, and her foot slipped off a rock into the inch-deep water. She quickly scrambled back to the path, and hurried on toward the bridge.

Once more her hat was detained, a few feet from the bridge, by a stick that was long and thin, and arched out from the bank like a long finger. For a few seconds the current pushed equally on both sides of the hat, and the single stick finger held her hat in a precarious balance.

Once again, she made her way out on the rocks, in a little more hurry now, and not so concerned about getting her feet wet (again). There was a small pile of rocks a little upstream from the stick finger, and they were close enough so if she scrambled out into the river on them, and leaned out as far as she could, she would be able to reach her hat. She really didn't want to lose the hat, because she had picked it out herself in the shops around the town square. Her mother had wanted her to get a red, white, and blue ribbon, but her heart had settled on the blue, white, and purple, the one she got.

As she leaned and reached out toward the hat with her left hand, the round rock she was bracing her other hand against came loose and rolled over. She lost her balance, and awkwardly fell, skinning her right knee on one rock, and banging her left shin on the biggest rock, the one she had been standing on.

She hadn't fallen in the river, but now her feet were really wet, and the scrapes hurt. At that moment her heart filled with pity for herself, and as she watched the boater hat set sail once again, her pity doubled inside her, and she knew she was almost ready to cry.

When the hat sailed under the shadow of the bridge, she heard the sound of heavy feet again, and with a leaping heart, for the moment forgetting her hurt knee, she peered intensely into the dark shadows under the bridge. She saw something moving quickly, toward the water's edge. How graceful it was moving, she thought, even though it seemed as big as a water buffalo (or so she imagined a water buffalo, having never seen one).

This massive form, on two legs now, then on four, not looking that different in color from the rocks under the bridge, loped down to the water, and made a lunge for her hat as it drifted toward the sunshine on the far side of the bridge. Her heart panged deeply when she saw, for sure, a thick hand, as big as an elephant's hand she thought, if elephants had hands, reach out and gently pick up her hat by the rudder-ribbon before it set sail to far distant shores down the river.

This creature then drew back into the shadow under the bridge, so she could no longer see the bright shape of her hat in its hand (or what she thought was a hand), and seemed to stop moving.

After a long period of consideration, both by the creature and herself, there was some common realization that they were going to have to meet, because they both knew she needed to recover her hat. Little aches in her legs reminded her of her

fall as she got up and made her way back onto the path. She thought she could hear the shuffling steps of the unknown creature. When she took a step toward the bridge, she was sure she heard a step taken under the bridge, but it was too dark under there to tell. She tried again and again to see its outline, but grew confused over which pile of rocks she thought might be holding her hat. When she stopped to stand still and listen, she could hear nothing but the wind and the river.

Finally, when she was within two steps of the dark shade of the bridge, she stopped and faced the river, knowing she was at the limits of her courage. To keep herself from fleeing at that moment she started to sing her song to herself, in a very timid and quiet voice.

Then a large gentle hand, encrusted like the hand of a rhinoceros, reached out of the shade, and placed her hat on a rock at the side of the path. Susan stared in wonder at this hand, but had no more fear than watching gorillas in their glass cages at the zoo. She felt this creature must somehow be caged under the bridge, unable to come out of its shadow into the sun. She overcame any urge to run away immediately, promising herself she would start running away as soon as she felt she should.

And then this brave little girl did something that would change her life immensely from that moment forward. She introduced herself.

"Hi. My name is Susan. What's your name?"

For a moment she thought the creature would answer in her head, the way the river told her stories. But instead a shiver overcame her when she heard the words:

"Babu Bishka."

Copyright 1993-1997 Scott E. Johnston

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/1.0> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.