R. K. Narayan

(1906 – 2001)

R.K. Narayan was an Indian writer who is best remembered for his stories set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. Narayan's style is simple, easy and unpretentious and his stories explore with humour and compassion the everyday lives of ordinary people.

The following is an edited version of his short story, 'A Horse and Two Goats'. In it, Narayan describes what happens when an English speaking American meets an illiterate South Indian villager who knows only Tamil and has never stepped outside his village. The foreigner with his English is baffled [Surprised] by the incomprehensible [cannot be understood] and bizarre [strange] behaviour of Muni while Muni is equally mystified [confused] by the American's strange words and antics [strange behaviour].

Using the simplest of settings, Narayan has crafted a sensitive yet amusing story, rich in situational comedy.

R.K. Laxman's "The Common Man"

(brother)

3 | A Horse and Two Goats

— R.K. Narayan

Of the seven hundred thousand villages dotting the map of India, Kritam was probably the tiniest, indicated on the district survey map by a microscopic dot. But its size did not prevent its giving itself the grandiose name Kritam, which meant in Tamil "coronet" or "crown" on the brow of this subcontinent. The village consisted of less than thirty houses, only one of them built with brick and cement. Painted a brilliant yellow and blue all over with gorgeous carvings of gods and gargoyles on its balustrade, it was known as the Big House. The other houses, distributed in four streets, were generally of bamboo thatch, straw, mud and other unspecified material. Muni's was the last house in the fourth street, beyond which stretched the fields. In his prosperous days Muni had owned a flock of forty sheep and goats and sallied forth every morning driving the flock to the highway a couple of miles away. There he would sit on the pedestal of a clay statue of a horse while his cattle grazed around. He carried a crook at the end of a bamboo pole and snapped foliage from the avenue trees to feed his flock; he also gathered faggots and dry sticks,
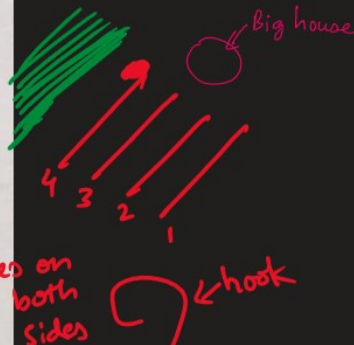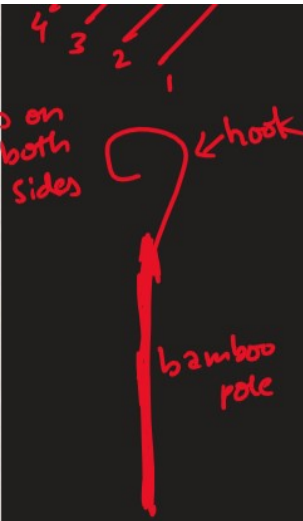
away. There he would sit on the pedestal of a clay statue of a horse while his cattle grazed around. He carried a crook at the end of a bamboo pole and snapped foliage from the avenue trees to feed his flock; he also gathered faggots and dry sticks, bundled them, and carried them home for fuel at sunset.

His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment for the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday.

His fortunes had declined gradually, unnoticed. From a flock of forty which he drove into a pen at night, his stock

52

had now come down to the two goats, which were tethered to the trunk of a drumstick tree which grew in front of his hut and from which occasionally Muni could shake down

Handwritten annotations:
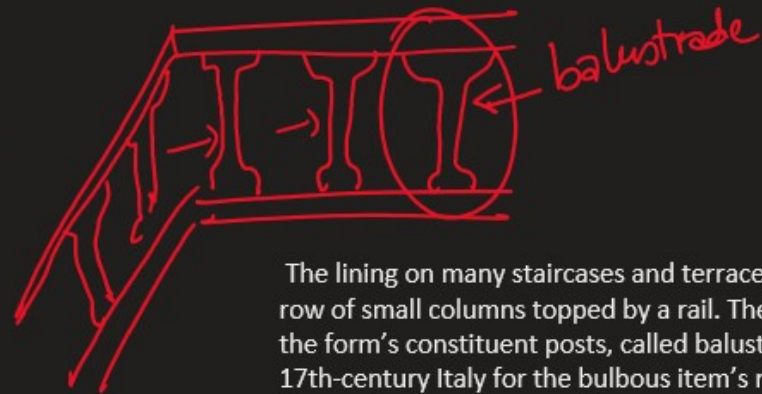- leaves
- sticks
- a road with trees on both sides
- 4 3 2 1
- ← hook
- bamboo pole
- wealth
- slowly
- animal shelter for goats & sheep
- Millet (raagi) ball
- tied

ward off evil-eye

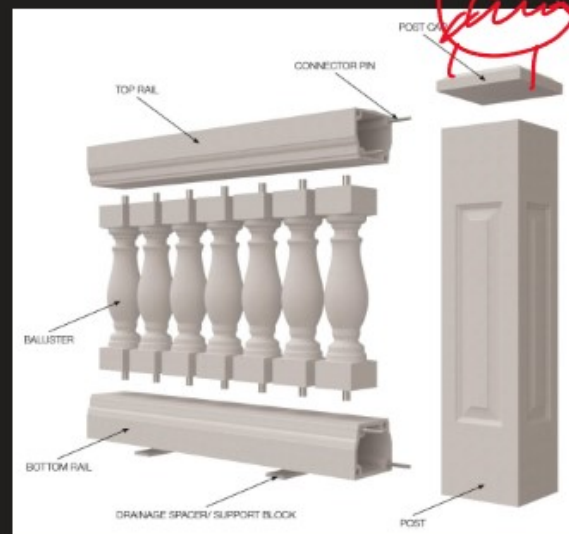Big house

4 3 2 1

←hook

with trees on both sides

bamboo pole

balustrade

The lining on many staircases and terraces, a balustrade is a row of small columns topped by a rail. The term is derived from the form's constituent posts, called balusters, a name coined in 17th-century Italy for the bulbous item's resemblance to blossoming pomegranate flowers (*balaustra* in Italian).

for goats & they

Millet (raagi) ball

of this houses, ainted a rvings of s the Big ts, were aspecified t, beyond Muni had rth every of miles tatue of a crook at he avenue dry sticks, set.

water in a ded salt, When he nch, once he could

. From a his stock

tied ethered of his down in with ly who w.

mstick

POST CAP

CONNECTOR PIN

TOP RAIL

BALUSTER

BOTTOM RAIL

DRAINAGE SPACER/ SUPPORT BLOCK

POST

had now come down to the two goats, which were tethered to the trunk of a drumstick tree which grew in front of his hut and from which occasionally Muni could shake down drumsticks. This morning he got six. He carried them in with a sense of triumph. Although no one could say precisely who owned the tree, it was his because he lived in its shadow.

His wife said, "If you were content with the drumstick leaves alone, I could boil and salt some for you."

"Oh, I am tired of eating those leaves. I have a craving to chew the drumstick out of sauce, I tell you."

"You have only four teeth in your jaw, but your craving is for big things. All right, get the stuff for the sauce, and I will prepare it for you. After all, next year you may not be alive to ask for anything. But first get me all the stuff, including a measure of rice or millet, and I will satisfy your unholy craving. Our store is empty today. Dhall, chilly, curry leaves, mustard, coriander, gingelley oil, and one large potato. Go out and get all this." He repeated the list after her in order not to miss any item and walked off to the shop in the third street.

Muni sat patiently on an upturned packing case below the platform of the shop. The shop man paid no attention to him.

all this." He repeated the list after her in order not to miss any item and walked off to the shop in the third street.

Muni sat patiently on an upturned packing case below the platform of the shop. The shop man paid no attention to him. Muni kept clearing his throat, coughing, and sneezing until the shop man could not stand it anymore and demanded, "What ails you? You will fly off that seat into the gutter if you sneeze so hard, young man." Muni laughed inordinately, in order to please the shop man, at being called "young man." This completely won the shop man over; he liked his sense of humour to be appreciated.

By thus humouring the shop man, Muni could always ask for one or two items of food, promising repayment later. Some days the shop man was in a good mood and gave in, and

53

2) What made Muni laugh "inordinately"? Why? (3)

Ans:) Muni laughed "inordinately" as he wanted to please the shopkeeper so, that the shopkeeper could ~~lend~~ give him some groceries on credit