ROMI AND THE WILDFIRE



RUSKIN BOND

Illustrated by Prasun Mazumdar

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Born in 1934, RUSKIN BOND grew up in Jamnagar, Shimla, New Delhi and Dehradun. He has been writing for over sixty years, and now has over 120 titles in print—novels, collections of stories, poetry, essays, anthologies, and books for children. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, received the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1957. He has also received the Padma Shri, and two awards from the Sahitya Akademi—one for his short stories and another for his writings for children. In 2012, the Delhi government gave him its Lifetime Achievement Award. He lives in Mussoorie with his adopted family.

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ONE

As Romi was about to mount his bicycle, he saw smoke rising from behind the distant line of trees.

'It looks like a forest fire,' said Prem, his friend and classmate.



'It's well to the east,' said Romi. 'Nowhere near the road.'

'There's a strong wind,' said Prem, looking at the dry leaves swirling across the road.

It was the middle of May, and it hadn't rained for several weeks. The grass was brown, the leaves of the trees covered with dust. Even though it was getting on to six o'clock in the evening, the boys' shirts were damp with sweat.



‘It will be getting dark soon,’ said Prem. ‘You’d better spend the night at my house.’

‘No, I said I’d be home tonight. My father isn’t keeping well. The doctor has given me some pills for him.’

‘You’d better hurry, then. That fire seems to be spreading.’

‘Oh, it’s far off. It will take me only forty minutes to ride through the forest. ‘Bye, Prem—see you tomorrow!’



Romi mounted his bicycle and pedalled off down the main road of the village, scattering stray hens, stray dogs and stray villagers.

‘Hey, look where you’re going!’ shouted an angry villager, leaping out of the way of the oncoming bicycle. ‘Do you think you own the road?’

‘Of course I own it,’ called Romi cheerfully, and cycled on.

His own village lay about seven miles distant, on the other side of the forest; but there was only a primary school in his village, and Romi was now at High School. His father, who was a fairly wealthy sugar-cane farmer, had only recently bought him the bicycle. Romi didn’t care too much for school and felt there weren’t enough holidays; but he enjoyed the long rides, and he got on well with his classmates.



He might have stayed the night with Prem had it not been for the pills which the Vaid—the village doctor—had given him for his father. Romi's father was having back trouble, and the pills had been specially prepared from local herbs.



Having been given such a fine bicycle, Romi felt that the least he could do in

return was to get those pills to his father as early as possible.

He put his head down and rode swiftly out of the village. Ahead of him, the smoke rose from the burning forest and the sky glowed red.



TWO

He had soon left the village far behind. There was a slight climb, and Romi had to push harder on the pedals to get over the rise. Once over the top, the road went winding down to the edge of the forest.

This was the part Romi enjoyed most. He relaxed, stopped pedalling, and allowed the bicycle to glide gently down the slope. Soon the wind was rushing past him, blowing his hair about his face and making his shirt billow out behind him. He burst into song.

A dog from the village ran beside him, barking furiously. Romi shouted to the dog, encouraging him in the race.

Then the road straightened out, and Romi began pedalling again.

The dog, seeing the forest ahead, turned back to the village. It was afraid of the forest.

The smoke was thicker now, and Romi caught the smell of burning timber. But ahead of him the road was clear. He rode on.

It was a rough, dusty road, cut straight through the forest. Tall trees grew on either side, cutting off the last of the daylight. But the spreading glow of the fire on the right lit up the road, and giant tree-shadows danced before the boy on the bicycle.



Usually the road was deserted. This evening it was alive with wild creatures fleeing from the forest fire.

The first animal that Romi saw was a hare, leaping across the road in front of him. It was followed by several more hares. Then a band of monkeys streamed across, chattering excitedly.



They'll be safe on the other side, thought Romi. The fire won't cross the road.

But it was coming closer. And realizing this, Romi pedalled harder. In half an hour he should be out of the forest.

Suddenly, from the side of the road, several pheasants rose in the air, and with a *whoosh* flew low across the path, just in front of the oncoming bicycle. Taken by surprise, Romi fell off. When he picked himself up and began brushing his clothes, he saw that his knee was bleeding. It wasn't a deep cut, but he allowed it to bleed a little, took out his handkerchief and bandaged his knee. Then he mounted the bicycle again.



He rode a bit slower now, because birds and animals kept coming out of the bushes.



Not only pheasants but smaller birds, too, were streaming across the road—parrots, jungle crows, owls, magpies—and the air was filled with their cries.



Everyone’s on the move, thought Romi. It must be a really big fire.

He could see the flames now, reaching out from behind the trees on his right, and he could hear the crackling as the dry leaves caught fire. The air was hot on his face. Leaves, still alight or turning to cinders, floated past.

A herd of deer crossed the road, and Romi had to stop until they had passed. Then he mounted again and rode on; but now, for the first time, he was feeling afraid.



THREE

From ahead came a faint clanging sound. It wasn't an animal sound, Romi was sure of that. A fire engine? There were no fire engines within fifty miles.

The clanging came nearer, and Romi discovered that the noise came from a small boy who was running along the forest path, two milk cans clattering at his side.

'Teju!' called Romi, recognizing a boy from a neighbouring village. 'What are you doing out here?'

'Trying to get home, of course,' said Teju, panting along beside the bicycle.

'Jump on,' said Romi, stopping for him.



Teju was only eight or nine—a couple of years younger than Romi. He had come to deliver milk to some road workers, but the workers had left at the first signs of the fire, and Teju was hurrying home with his cans still full of milk.

He got up on the crossbar of the bicycle, and Romi moved on again. He was quite used to carrying friends on the crossbar.

‘Keep beating your milk cans,’ said Romi. ‘Like that, the animals will know we are coming. My bell doesn’t make enough noise. I’m going to get a horn for my cycle!’

‘I never knew there were so many animals in the jungle,’ said Teju. ‘I saw a python in the middle of the road. It stretched right across!’

‘What did you do?’

‘Just kept running and jumped right over it!’

Teju continued to chatter but Romi’s thoughts were on the fire, which was much closer now. Flames shot up from the dry grass and ran up the trunks of trees and along the branches. Smoke billowed out above the forest.



Romi’s eyes were smarting and his hair and eyebrows felt scorched. He was feeling tired but he couldn’t stop now, he had to get beyond the range of the fire. Another ten or fifteen minutes of steady riding would get them to the small wooden bridge that spanned the little river separating the forest from the sugar-cane fields.

Once across the river, they would be safe. The fire could not touch them on the other side, because the forest ended at the river’s edge. But could they get to the river in time?



FOUR

Clang, clang, clang, went Teju's milk cans. But the sounds of the fire grew louder too.

A tall silk cotton tree, its branches leaning across the road, had caught fire. They were almost beneath it when there was a crash and a burning branch fell to the ground a few yards in front of them.

The boys had to get off the bicycle and leave the road, forcing their way through a tangle of thorny bushes on the left, dragging and pushing at the bicycle and only returning to the road some distance ahead of the burning tree.

'We won't get out in time,' said Teju, back on the crossbar but feeling disheartened.

'Yes, we will,' said Romi, pedalling with all his might. 'The fire hasn't crossed the road as yet.'

Even as he spoke, he saw a small flame leap up from the grass on the left. It wouldn't be long before more sparks and burning leaves were blown across the road to kindle the grass on the other side.

'Oh, look!' exclaimed Romi, bringing the bicycle to a sudden stop.

'What's wrong now?' asked Teju, rubbing his sore eyes. And then, through the smoke, he saw what was stopping them.

An elephant was standing in the middle of the road.

Teju slipped off the crossbar, his cans rolling on the ground, bursting open and spilling their contents.

The elephant was about forty feet away. It moved about restlessly, its big ears flapping as it turned its head from side to side, wondering which way to go.

From far to the left, where the forest was still untouched, a herd of elephants moved towards the river. The leader of the herd raised his trunk and trumpeted a call. Hearing it, the elephant on the road raised its own trunk and trumpeted a reply. Then it shambled off into the forest, in the direction of the herd, leaving the way clear.



‘Come, Teju, jump on!’ urged Romi. ‘We can’t stay here much longer!’

FIVE

Teju forgot about his milk cans and pulled himself up on the crossbar. Romi ran forward with the bicycle, to gain speed, and mounted swiftly. He kept as far as possible to the left of the road, trying to ignore the flames, the crackling, the smoke and the scorching heat.



It seemed that all the animals who could get away had done so. The exodus across the road had stopped.

‘We won’t stop again,’ said Romi, gritting his teeth. ‘Not even for an elephant!’

‘We’re nearly there!’ said Teju. He was perking up again.

A jackal, overcome by the heat and smoke, lay in the middle of the path, either dead or unconscious. Romi did not stop. He swerved round the animal. Then he put all his strength into one final effort.

He covered the last hundred yards at top speed, and then they were out of the forest, freewheeling down the sloping road to the river.

‘Look!’ shouted Teju. ‘The bridge is on fire!’



Burning embers had floated down on to the small wooden bridge, and the dry, ancient timber had quickly caught fire. It was now burning fiercely.

Romi did not hesitate. He left the road, riding the bicycle over sand and pebbles. Then with a rush they went down the riverbank and into the water.



The next thing they knew they were splashing around, trying to find each other in the darkness.

‘Help!’ cried Teju. ‘I’m drowning!’



SIX

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Romi. ‘The water isn’t deep—it’s only up to the knees. Come here and grab hold of me.’

Teju splashed across and grabbed Romi by the belt.

‘The water’s so cold,’ he said, his teeth chattering.

‘Do you want to go back and warm yourself?’ asked Romi. ‘Some people are never satisfied. Come on, help me get the bicycle up. It’s down here, just where we are standing.’

Together they managed to heave the bicycle out of the water and stand it upright.

‘Now sit on it,’ said Romi. ‘I’ll push you across.’

‘We’ll be swept away,’ said Teju.

‘No, we won’t. There’s not much water in the river at this time of the year. But the current is quite strong in the middle, so sit still. All right?’

‘All right,’ said Teju nervously.

Romi began guiding the bicycle across the river, one hand on the seat and one hand on the handlebar. The river was shallow and sluggish in midsummer; even so, it was quite swift in the middle. But having got safely out of the burning forest, Romi was in no mood to let a little river defeat him.

He kicked off his shoes, knowing they would be lost; and then gripping the smooth stones of the riverbed with his toes, he concentrated on keeping his balance and getting the bicycle and Teju through the middle of the stream. The water here came up to his waist, and the current would have been too strong for Teju. But when they reached the shallows, Teju got down and helped Romi push the bicycle.

They reached the opposite bank, and sank down on the grass.

‘We can rest now,’ said Romi. ‘But not all night—I’ve got some medicine to give my father.’



He felt in his pockets and found that the pills, in their envelope, had turned to a soggy mess. ‘Oh well, he has to take them with water anyway,’ he said.

They watched the fire as it continued to spread through the forest. It had crossed the road down which they had come. The sky was a bright red, and the river reflected the colour of the sky.

Several elephants had found their way down to the river. They were cooling off by spraying water on each other with their trunks. Further downstream there were deer and other animals.

Romi and Teju looked at each other in the glow of the fire. They hadn’t known each other very well before. But now they felt they had been friends for years.

‘What are you thinking about?’ asked Teju.



‘I’m thinking,’ said Romi, ‘that even if the fire is out in a day or two, it will be a long time before the bridge is repaired. So I’m thinking it will be a nice long holiday from school!’

‘But you can walk across the river,’ said Teju. ‘You just did it.’

‘Impossible,’ said Romi. ‘It’s much too swift.’

A BRAVE BOY'S DESPERATE JOURNEY THROUGH A FOREST ON FIRE.

The billowing smoke in the distance warns Romi that there is a wildfire in the forest. As he cycles home to give his father some medicines, he finds that the fire is spreading in the direction of his village quicker than he thought. It is now a dangerous place full of falling trees, leaping flames and panicked animals. Together with Teju, the little boy he meets on the way, he must race towards the river to escape the fire and get the medicines to his father on time.

A tale of bravery, courage and resilience, *Romi and the Wildfire* will warm the hearts of readers young and old.

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