

The Bird with the Golden Wings: Stories of Wit and Magic

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SUDHA MURTY THE BIRD WITH GOLDEN WINGS *Stories of Wit and Magic Illustrations by Ajanta Guhathakurta* PUFFIN BOOKS PUFFIN BOOKS Contents

[The Golden Fish and the Demon](#)

[Divide and Eat](#)

[Skills for a Prince](#)

[How the Sea Became Salty](#)

[The Banana Tree Princess](#)

[How to Catch a Goddess](#)

[The Precious Rupee](#)

[The Bird with Golden Wings](#)

[The Smartest Cook](#)

[Sukeshini and the Lake Demon](#)

[The Silly Rich Boy](#)

[The Clever Thieves](#)

[The King with Donkey's Ears](#)

[Books for the Cook](#)

[The Kind Stepmother](#)

[A Father's Wisdom](#)

[The Cunning Lion](#)

[The Magic Jug](#)

[The Wishing Tree](#)

[Tit for Tat](#)

[Sow a Witch](#)

[Follow Penguin](#)

[Copyright](#) PUFFIN BOOKS THE BIRD WITH GOLDEN WINGS Sudha Murty was born in 1950 in Shiggaon in north Karnataka. She did her MTech in computer science, and is now the chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. A prolific writer in English and Kannada, she has written novels, technical books, travelogues, collections of short stories and non-fictional pieces, and four books for children. Her books have been translated into all the major Indian languages. Sudha Murty was the recipient of the R.K. Narayan Award for Literature and the Padma Shri in 2006, and the Attimabbe Award from the government of Karnataka for excellence in Kannada literature in 2011.

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The Golden Fish and the Demon Suraj was a fisherman. He lived with his wife Lakshmi in a little village by the sea. Suraj would sail his boat into the sea every day to catch fish. He would come back with his small net full of fish, enough to earn him a little money. The couple was poor and did not have any children. While Suraj was a nice, kind man, Lakshmi always felt she knew best and

loved telling Suraj what to do in a loud voice. For the sake of some peace and quiet, Suraj did exactly as his wife told him. One morning, Lakshmi strode up to where Suraj was sitting and eating his breakfast before leaving to catch fish and shouted, "There is no firewood in the house. How will I cook? You must get some wood from the market when you return home this evening." Suraj nodded quietly, picked up his net and set off. He sat in his boat for a long time that day, his net trailing in the water, but could not trap a single fish. At sunset, Suraj decided to give up and head home. Worried about the scolding he would get from his wife, Suraj slowly pulled his net from the water. To his surprise, it felt heavy. When he pulled it out of the water, he was astonished to see a tiny golden-coloured fish trapped in the net. Just as he was about to throw the fish into the bucket kept next to him, it spoke in a human voice. "Please don't take me. Leave me in the sea. I will give you whatever you want." Suraj was scared. Such a thing had never happened to him in all the years he had gone fishing. But the fish did look quite sad, and he felt bad for it. Who would want to buy such a small fish anyway, he thought, and he threw it back into the water. As it landed with a splash, the fish said in a loud voice, "Thank you for saving me. Tell me what you want and I shall fulfil your wish." In a flash Suraj remembered his wife's command to bring home some firewood. He shouted, "My wife wants firewood to use in our kitchen. Can you please give me some?" The fish replied, "Go home. Your wish will be fulfilled." Suraj went home, feeling a little nervous. What if the fish did not keep its promise? Lakshmi would be furious, and would not believe his story either! But as he neared his home, he saw the entire courtyard was filled with firewood. He clapped his hands in glee and rushed to his wife. He told her all about the fish. But Lakshmi was not happy at all! Suraj had been granted a wish and all he had asked for was firewood! "You silly fish-head!" she screamed. "Go back right now and ask the fish to give us some food as well. Do you think we can fill our stomachs with firewood?" Suraj trudged back to the seashore and called out to his little fish friend. There was a flash of light in the dark waters and the fish came swimming up, right in front of him. Suraj joined his palms and said very politely, "O little golden fish, my wife is not satisfied with just firewood. She has told me to ask you for some food as well." The fish leaped, did a little twirl in the air and said, "So be it." Then it was gone in the twinkling of an eye. Suraj hurried back home and, sure enough, his house was full of sacks of foodgrain, enough to last them for many months. Lakshmi, too, looked happy and for a few days there was peace in the house. Then one day Lakshmi had to go visit her friend in the next village. As she took out her two good saris from the cupboard, she complained loudly, "What can we do with only grains? How can they make us look good? Just see this tattered old sari I am wearing. My friend will laugh when she sees me wearing it. Go and ask the fish for some grand clothes for us." Suraj knew he could not argue with his wife, so he walked to the sea and called out to the golden fish. Again, the fish appeared as soon as Suraj called, and when he asked for new clothes, it did a twirl in the air and granted the wish. For a few days, Lakshmi was happy and had a wonderful time at her friend's house showing off her shiny new saris. Then she became gloomy again. "What is the use of food, clothing and wood? We require a better house. Go and ask your fish for it," she told her husband. Suraj did as she asked, and the fish granted him this wish as well. After some time, Lakshmi thought of another demand. "Ask the fish to give us plenty of gold so that we need not ask for anything again." This time, too, her wish was fulfilled. Suraj was also happy. He would not have to come to the sea any more and beg the fish for different things. But Lakshmi could not rest. Now that they had a huge house and pots of gold, she became scared that thieves would come and steal everything. "Do you have any sense or not?" she shouted at her husband. "What if we are attacked by robbers at night? We will lose all this hard-won wealth. Go and tell your fish to do something so that no one ever dares come near us, or tries to steal from us." Poor Suraj went again to the seashore and called out to the fish. As had happened earlier, when the fish appeared, Suraj told the fish what he wanted in exactly the words his wife had used. This time, too, the fish leaped up and dived back into the water after granting the wish. Slowly, Suraj walked home, wondering what would happen to them. As he neared his house, he noticed a strange, hairy, demon-like creature standing near the door. It was big, with muscular

arms, two horns on its head, long nails on its fingers, and huge teeth. When it saw him, it came rushing up and, to his horror, Suraj realized Lakshmi had been transformed into a fearful demon! Now no one would ever dare to come near them or try to steal their gold. Lakshmi stood in front of him and burst into tears. "Your fish has played a trick on us! It has made me look like this so that no one will want to be near me. Hurry! Don't just stand there, go and tell him to turn me back into the way I was!" Suraj ran all the way to the sea. There, he called and called, requesting his little golden fish friend to come out. But it did not appear. No one saw the fish or Suraj ever again. And greedy Lakshmi remained a demon till the day she died; a rich, old woman but with no friends.

Divide and Eat Once upon a time, there were two brothers. Though they were twins, they were as different from each other as chalk and cheese. While Ramesh was well built, cheerful and always ready to help people in need, Suresh was thin, quiet and a miser. The brothers did not get along well with each other and spent all their time quarrelling, much to their mother's annoyance. When they were twenty years old, they decided to leave their village and go to the big city to make a living. On their way to the city, they had to cross a forest. The two walked through the forest, arguing as usual. It was a hot day, and when they reached a huge banyan tree, standing under its soothing shade, they finally agreed on something; that they were ravenously hungry! Quickly, they opened their bags and took out the lunch boxes their mother had packed for them. Knowing well they would argue bitterly if they had to share their lunch, their mother had packed two boxes. There were other travellers, too, who had stopped to eat their food under the shade of the tree, and some were taking a restful nap before carrying on. The brothers washed their hands in a nearby stream and opened their boxes. To their surprise, they saw that while Ramesh had been given three parathas, there were only two in Suresh's tiffin box. Perhaps their mother thought Ramesh, with his hearty appetite, would need to eat more. But Suresh was very upset. So what if he couldn't eat more than two parathas, how dare Mother give him less, he fumed. As they were about to start eating, a traveller came up to them and said, "Brothers, I am sorry to interrupt your meal, but I have lost my way. I am very hungry. I have money in my pocket, but where can I buy food in this forest? If you share your food with me, I will pay you for it." Suresh readily agreed, always happy to earn some money. Ramesh nodded too, but because he felt sorry for the stranger and wanted to help him. The three settled down and divided up all the parathas amongst themselves. They ate till they were full. The traveller was delighted. Even the simplest of meals can taste like a king's banquet when you are famished! When they had finished, they washed up. The traveller placed five silver coins in front of them and said, "You shared your food with me when I was about to faint with hunger. May god bless you. I will take your leave now." Ramesh took three of the five coins and gave the remaining two to his brother. Suresh was very angry! "We shared our food equally with the man, so I should get half of whatever he gave us. You should give me another half-coin." Ramesh smiled and said, "I shared three parathas, while you shared two. So I should get three coins and you should get two. But if you are unhappy with this division, I don't mind giving you a half-coin from my share. I don't have any change at the moment, though. When we reach the city, I'll give you your remaining share." But Suresh was in no mood to wait. "I want my half-coin right now!" he demanded. Helplessly, Ramesh went to another traveller who was dozing under the tree and perhaps listening to their argument. When Ramesh asked him for change, the man removed the scarf with which he had covered his face and, smiling, said, "I have heard everything. You cannot get three coins. If you want, I can work out exactly how much each one of you should get." Ramesh and Suresh agreed that they would share the coins exactly as per the man's instructions. The man sat up straight, crossed his legs, closed his eyes and told them, "Listen to me carefully. The two of you together had five parathas. When the stranger joined you, there were three of you. Now if you divide each paratha into three pieces, that makes fifteen pieces in all. If fifteen pieces have to be eaten equally by three people, each one will get five pieces. Ramesh, from your three parathas you had nine pieces, of which you ate five and gave the stranger four. Suresh, from your two parathas, you had six pieces. Of these six, you ate five pieces and gave one to the stranger. So the man got four pieces from Ramesh and one from you. To make

a fair division of the five coins he gave, Ramesh should get four coins and Suresh one. Suresh was very upset; his share was even lesser now! But he had to agree with this clever bit of maths. Skills for a Prince Amritsena, a young prince, was very popular with his subjects. Everyone praised his sense of fairness. He also loved to play pranks and made the courtiers laugh. He often disguised himself and roamed the streets of the capital city, listening to what the people were saying, and learnt about the problems of the common man this way. During one such tour, he came across three young men on the outskirts of the city. From their attire they appeared to be strangers. They were huddled together, talking to each other. Amritsena walked up to them and said, 'You look new to this city. Can I help you?' One of the men replied, 'We are students of Sage Kashyapa and have recently finished our studies. We are looking for work where we can put our special skills to use.' At once, Amritsena's ears pricked up. 'And what are these special skills? I work in the king's court and I may be able to help you find a job there.' One of the young men said, 'Just by tapping my feet, I can make out what is below the ground.'

A poor little girl is rewarded with lovely gifts when she feeds a hungry bird all the rice she has. What happens when the girl's greedy, nosy neighbour hears the story and tries to get better gifts for herself? Why did the once sweet sea water turn salty? How did the learned teacher forget his lessons only to be aided by the school cook? And how did the king hide his horrible donkey ears from the people of his kingdom?

For answers to all this and more, delve right into another fabulous collection of stories by Sudha Murty.

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