

A Bedtime Story – Aditya, Year 6, NSW

“So, what story shall I tell you tonight?” I ask as I ease myself into a chair. I’m not as fit as I once was, and arthritis has claimed my tired legs. But letting that interfere with the story? No, that just won’t do. So I settle in, and wait for Priya’s response.

“Tell me about someone famous, *dadu*,” is her answer, eyes jewel-bright. As an afterthought, she adds, “But not one of your boring stories about pilots or planes!”

I smirk. Exactly what Priya finds ‘boring’ about tales from my time as an Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot is something I’ll never be able to understand. But I’ve never known my granddaughter as being flexible, so I return to the drawing-board.

“Who will I tell you about? Oh, I know! Do you know Gandhiji?” I ask.

“Yes, yes. He helped India become an independent nation, blah blah blah,” she tells me, with all of the huffing and puffing that only a six-year-old can muster. “Mama told me the story loads of times.” She sounds quite convincing, but I can tell from the way she sits forward, clinging to my every word. Knowing Priya, she’s probably only heard someone mention him once or twice.

“I don’t think what Mama told you is a story. How about I tell you what actually happened?” I venture.

“OK, *dadu*. Just this once. But next time I want to hear the *Three Little Pigs*.” I smile. Then I take a breath and begin...

“Gandhiji was a great leader. You know how you see the Prime Minister on TV and he gives big speeches and all? That’s a leader. But—”

“So Gandhiji was the Prime Minister?” Priya pipes up.

“No, Priya. But he was still a leader. A Prime Minister is a type of leader. You don’t have to be a Prime Minister to be a leader. A good leader encourages people work together for the greater good. A great leader inspires people to put aside their differences and work for the greater good. And Gandhiji was a great leader!”

“*Dadu*, stop using big words,” Priya pouts, using her best *Please-can-you-tell-me-a-different-story* face. “Can’t you just tell me an *actual* story?”

“No, Priya. And I’m not using big words.”

“Yes you are. You are using big, big, BIG words,” she says, putting her arms out wide to show me just how big the words I’m using are.

“OK. I’ll put it this way,” I tell her, rephrasing my words. “If you look at two people, a Squadron Leader and a Flight Lieutenant, Gandhiji was –”

“No, *Dadu!* Not planes! Planes make my brain hurt,” is Priya’s pleading rejoinder.

“Fine, then. Let me tell you a story about Gandhiji.”

I smile, take a breath and begin for the second time. Because as any pilot will tell you, you can’t fly a good mission without running into some turbulence...

“Once upon a time there was a man called Gandhiji. He was just like you or me. But Gandhiji didn’t live in today’s world. He lived in another world, from long ago. He lived in India, but back then India wasn’t an independent country. You know Great Britain, from your Geography class?” Priya nods. “Back then, Great Britain ruled India. And a lot of people in India didn’t like that. You know, Gandhiji didn’t like that either. So he decided to –”

“Why didn’t he like Great Britain? Didn’t Mama study in Great Britain?” Priya butts in.

“Yes, Priya. Mama did study in Great Britain. But –”

A sudden realisation crosses the girl’s mind and her face goes red. I soon find out why.

“*Dadu!* Did Gandhiji not like Mama? Does India not like Mama?” she asks me, the note of anger evident in her voice.

“Of course they would like Mama!” I reply, watching with relief as the shock on her face disappears. “You must remember, Priya, that things were different back then. And so back then, Gandhiji decided to try and make the Britishers go away from India. Do you know how he did that, Priya?” I ask her.

“He went and hit them and punched them and kicked them and pushed them until they went away!” Priya says, eyes agleam with the possibility of so much violence.

“No, no, no, no, no! He did the opposite! He told the Britishers, ‘please go away from our country’, and they went from our country.”

“*Dadu*, you sound like Ms Rockefeller, our teacher! Yesterday, she told us that hitting is bad and you should always say “stop” and NEVER hit or push!”

“Exactly, Priya! That’s what you should always do!” I say.

“But *dadu*, my teacher is wrong. At lunch today, Dana took my hat and I told her “stop” but she said no so I had to hit her and punch her until she gave me my hat back.”

I blink for a second, surprised, then attempt to take in this brazen dump of (really quite disturbing) information. But I manage to regain my composure and continue my story relatively unfazed.

“Yes, where was I? Oh yes...Gandhiji told everyone to be nonviolent and not to take up arms. And he became an icon. He was an inspiration to all of India because he proved that nonviolence could be the solution sometimes. You know what, Priya? Maybe you can learn something from Gandhiji! I want you to go to school tomorrow and say sorry to Dana. Go and say, “Sorry for hitting you yesterday”. Does that sound good? *Beta?*”

I look at the bed where Priya is sitting. But she’s not sitting there. Instead, she’s lying with her army of soft toys, sleeping peacefully.

I smile once more.