

## ***Introduction***

*It was not until his good strong heart had pumped the last drop of blood from his body that he passed out of this, the best of all possible worlds, into the next.*

In this collection of Roald Dahl short stories for adults, people's lives are changed in some dramatic way and neither they nor the reader can guess what will happen to them until the end. Some of the characters are foolish, some are greedy, some are completely innocent, but they all experience surprise, shock . . . or worse. Roald Dahl is the master of the unexpected; the reader has to wait until the final pages of each story to discover the last terrible twist in the plot.

Roald Dahl was born on 13 September 1916 near Cardiff in Wales. His parents were Norwegian and he was named after the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (the first explorer to reach the South Pole, in 1911). When Roald Dahl was only four years old, his father died. His mother decided to stay in Britain so that her six children could be educated in English schools. As a young boy, it seems that Roald loved playing tricks on people and was often in trouble. When he was eight, he and four friends put a dead mouse in a jar of sweets at the local sweet shop because, Roald said, the woman who owned the shop was so unpleasant. The headmaster punished the five boys severely for this.

The next year, Roald was sent away to school. He was good at sports, especially rugby and football. He used to write to his mother almost every day, but he never told her how desperately unhappy he was at school. In fact, the happiest times of his childhood were the summer holidays spent with his parents'

relatives in Norway. Dahl wrote about his childhood in his book *Boy*.

After finishing school, he enjoyed three weeks travelling with a group of young people through Newfoundland, Canada. Although Roald's mother expected him to go to university, he wanted to travel and have adventures. He applied for a job with an oil company because he was sure they would send him abroad. He was right. After two years training in the UK, he was sent to Dar-es-Salaam, in Tanzania. In East Africa he found the adventure and challenge he wanted – travelling through the jungle, coming face to face with lions and poisonous snakes, learning the local language and coping with disease and illness.

When the Second World War started in 1939, he went to Nairobi, in Kenya, to join the Royal Air Force. He became a fighter pilot. Dahl shot down several enemy planes, but he was also shot down by enemy aircraft and was badly injured. However, after six months in hospital he went back to his work as a fighter pilot. During the war, he flew in North Africa, Greece and Syria.

In 1942, Dahl was transferred by the air force to Washington, in the US, where he began writing. His experiences in East Africa and as a war pilot can be seen in many of his early stories, such as 'An African Story' and 'Beware of the Dog'. These two stories were published in 1946 in a collection called *Over to You: Ten Stories of Flyers and Flying*.

After the war, Dahl wrote short stories about everyday life, not military life. Many of his stories first appeared in American and British magazines and were later published in collections. A collection of his short stories, *Someone Like You* (1953), included 'Man from the South' which is set in Jamaica. A later collection called *Kiss Kiss* (1959) included 'The Landlady', 'The Vicar's Pleasure', 'Pig' and 'The Champion of the World'.

Dahl moved back to England in 1960 and settled in a village called Great Missenden, in the south-east of England. Here,

he used to do all his writing in a small hut at the bottom of the garden. His hut was very basic; a plastic curtain covered the window and in the centre of the room was a faded, old-fashioned armchair that had belonged to his mother. Dahl would sit in this chair, his legs covered with a warm blanket, writing his stories. In the 1960s, Dahl also worked on adapting two of Ian Fleming's books when they were made into films. These were the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice* (1967) and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968). Some of Dahl's own short stories, including 'Man from the South' and 'The Landlady', were made into films for television. Later, in 1971, Dahl adapted his children's story 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' into the film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

Roald Dahl was married for thirty years (1953–83) to an American actress, Patricia Neal. They had five children. Roald would create bedtime stories to tell his young children and this is how he first became interested in writing children's books. His children's stories have an extraordinary mixture of humour, weird characters and strange, sometimes violent, events. Some of his most famous children's stories are 'James and the Giant Peach' (1961), 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' (1964), 'The BFG – The Big Friendly Giant' (1982) and 'Matilda' (1988).

Roald Dahl died in November 1990 at his home. In June 2005, the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre was opened in Great Missenden to celebrate his work and his life. His stories have been translated into more than forty languages. Today, he remains one of the best-known and most widely read writers.

Another collection of Dahl's stories adapted for Penguin Readers is called *Taste and Other Tales*.

## Man from the South

It was almost six o'clock, so I thought I'd buy a beer and go out and sit by the swimming pool and have a little evening sun.

I went to the bar and got the beer and carried it outside and wandered down the garden. It was a fine garden and there were plenty of chairs around the pool. There were white tables and huge brightly coloured umbrellas and sunburned men and women sitting around in bathing suits. In the pool itself there were three or four girls and about a dozen boys, all splashing about and making a lot of noise and throwing a large rubber ball at one another.

I stood watching them. The girls were English girls from the hotel. I didn't know about the boys, but they sounded American, and I thought they were probably young sailors from the American ship which had arrived in harbour that morning.

I went over and sat down under a yellow umbrella where there were four empty seats, and I poured my beer and settled back comfortably with a cigarette. It was pleasant to sit and watch the bathers splashing about in the green water.

The American sailors were getting on nicely with the English girls. They'd reached the point where they were diving under the water and pulling the girls up by their legs.

Just then I noticed a small old man walking quickly around the edge of the pool. He was beautifully dressed in a white suit and a cream-coloured hat, and as he walked he was looking at the people and the chairs.

He stopped beside me and smiled. I smiled back.

'Excuse me please, but may I sit here?'

'Certainly,' I said. 'Go ahead.'

He inspected the back of the chair for safety, then he sat down and crossed his legs.

'A fine evening,' he said. 'They are all fine evenings here in Jamaica.' I couldn't tell if his accent was Italian or Spanish, but I felt sure he was some sort of a South American. He was old, too, when you looked at him closely. Probably around sixty-eight or seventy.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's wonderful here, isn't it?'

'And who are all these? These are not hotel people.' He was pointing at the bathers in the pool.

'I think they're American sailors,' I told him.

'Of course they are Americans. Who else in the world is going to make as much noise as that? You are not American, no?'

'No,' I said. 'I am not.'

Suddenly one of the young sailors was standing in front of us. He was still wet from the pool and one of the English girls was standing there with him.

'Are these chairs free?' he said.

'Yes,' I answered.

'Mind if I sit down?'

'Go ahead.'

'Thanks,' he said. He had a towel in his hand, and when he sat down he unrolled it and produced a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. He offered the cigarettes to the girl but she refused; then he offered them to me and I took one. The old man said, 'Thank you, no, but I think I will have a cigar.' He took a cigar out of his pocket, then he produced a knife and cut the end off it.

'Here, let me give you a light.' The American boy held up his lighter.

'That will not work in this wind.'

'Sure it'll work. It always works.'

The old man removed the cigar from his mouth, moved his head to one side and looked at the boy.

'Always?' he said slowly.

'Sure, it never fails. Not with me anyway.'

‘Well, well. So you say this famous lighter never fails. Is that what you say?’

‘Sure,’ the boy said. ‘That’s right.’ He was about nineteen or twenty, with pale skin and a rather sharp nose. He was holding the lighter in his hand, ready to turn the little wheel. He said, ‘I promise you it never fails.’

‘One moment, please.’ The hand that held the cigar came up high, as if it were stopping traffic. ‘Now just one moment.’ He had a curiously soft voice and kept looking at the boy all the time. He smiled. ‘Shall we not make a little bet on whether your lighter lights?’

‘Sure, I’ll bet,’ the boy said. ‘Why not?’

‘You like to bet?’

‘Sure, I’ll always bet.’

The man paused and examined his cigar and I must say I didn’t much like the way he was behaving. It seemed he was trying to embarrass the boy, and at the same time I had the feeling he was enjoying a private little secret.

He looked up again at the boy and said slowly, ‘I like to bet, too. Why don’t we have a bet on this thing? A big bet.’

‘Now wait a minute,’ the boy said. ‘I can’t do that. But I’ll bet you a dollar. I’ll even bet you ten, or whatever the money is over here.’

The old man waved his hand again. ‘Listen to me. Let’s have some fun. We make a bet. Then we go up to my room here in the hotel where there’s no wind, and I bet you you cannot light this famous lighter of yours ten times one after another without missing once.’

‘I’ll bet I can,’ the boy said.

‘All right. Good. We make a bet, yes?’

‘Sure, I’ll bet you ten dollars.’

‘No, no. I am a rich man and I am a sporting man also. Listen to me. Outside the hotel is my car. It’s a very fine car. An American car from your country. Cadillac –’

‘Now, wait a minute.’ The boy leaned back and laughed. ‘I can’t offer you anything like that. This is crazy.’

‘It’s not crazy at all. You strike the lighter successfully ten times and the Cadillac is yours. You’d like to have this Cadillac, yes?’

‘Sure, I’d like to have a Cadillac.’ The boy was still smiling.

‘All right. Fine. We make a bet and I offer my Cadillac.’

‘What do I offer?’

The old man said, ‘I never ask you, my friend, to bet something that you cannot afford. You understand?’

‘So what do I bet?’

‘I’ll make it easy for you, yes?’

‘OK. You make it easy.’

‘Some small thing you can afford to give away, and if you did lose it you would not feel too bad. Right?’

‘Like what?’

‘Like, perhaps, the little finger on your left hand.’

‘My *what?*’ The boy stopped smiling.

‘Yes. Why not? You win, you take the car. You lose, I take the finger.’

‘I don’t understand. How d’you mean, you take the finger?’

‘I chop it off.’

‘That’s crazy. I think I’ll just bet ten dollars.’

‘Well, well, well,’ the old man said. ‘I do not understand. You say it lights but you will not bet. Then we forget it, yes?’

The boy sat quite still, staring at the bathers in the pool. Then he remembered that he hadn’t lit his cigarette. He put it between his lips, opened the lighter and turned the wheel. It lit and burned with a small, steady, yellow flame, and the way he held his hands meant that the wind didn’t get to it at all.

‘Could I have a light, too?’ I said.

‘God, I’m sorry, I forgot you didn’t have one.’

He stood up and came over to light my cigarette. There was a silence then, and I could see that the old man had succeeded in

disturbing the boy with his ridiculous suggestion. He was sitting there very still, obviously tense. Then he started moving about in his seat, and rubbing his chest and stroking the back of his neck. Finally he placed both hands on his knees and began tapping his fingers against them. Soon he was tapping with one of his feet, too.

‘Now just let me check I understand,’ he said at last. ‘You say we go up to your room and if I make this lighter light ten times one time after another I win a Cadillac. If it misses just once then I lose the little finger of my left hand. Is that right?’

‘Certainly. That is the bet. But I think you are afraid.’

‘What do we do if I lose? Do I have to hold my finger out while you chop it off?’

‘Oh, no! That would not be good. And you might refuse to hold it out. What I would do is tie one of your hands to the table before we started, and I would stand there with a knife ready to chop the moment your lighter missed.’

‘How old is the Cadillac?’

‘How old? It is last year’s. Quite a new car. But I see you are not a betting man. Americans never are.’

The boy paused for a moment and he glanced first at the English girl, then at me. ‘Yes,’ he said suddenly. ‘I’ll bet you.’

‘Good!’ The old man clapped his hands together. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘We will do it now. And you, sir.’ He turned to me. ‘You would perhaps be good enough to, what do you call it, to – to referee.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I think it’s a crazy bet. I don’t like it very much.’

‘Neither do I,’ said the English girl. It was the first time she’d spoken. ‘I think it’s a stupid, ridiculous bet.’

‘Are you serious about cutting off this boy’s finger if he loses?’ I said.

‘Certainly I am. Also about giving him my Cadillac if he wins. Come now. We will go to my room. Would you like to put on some clothes first?’ he said to the boy.