

Story #7b

The Unseen

7. Listen to your students as if their commentary may reveal deeper truth than yours.

(The Teacher's Bill of Rights)

The Unseen. You know Helen Keller said, "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart." So today, I'm going to tell you a story that I told at the wonderful Rainbow Community School, here in Asheville, NC in 2017. I was guest teaching science lessons and a science club. One day, we paused doing science experiments for the following story. It's one of my favorites. It was first told to me in a room full of adults. So, it was told to adults, but it's about a story told to children. It comes, inspired by a story from Laurens Van der Post in his book *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961). But I've changed it over the years and for almost half a century now, I've been telling this story to children. It's my absolute favorite story. I've also told it to adults, so I'm telling it to you today. It's about *the unseen*.

"The Milk Maiden"

Once, there was a story. The story was for adults, but in the story, you hear about another story that was told to children. It was told over and over. It was told by a babysitter in the Kalahari, a semi-arid desert in Southern Africa. Every time the babysitter came, the children asked her to tell their favorite story. Now, I will tell you the one she told the children.

Once upon a time, there was a young farm boy. His job was to watch over the cows as they grazed. Every day, he took the cows to the same place. It was a pasture up on the side of the mountain. Over the pasture was a cliff that hung in the air just above the cows. Every day, the boy brought the cows and looked up at the rock cliff to wonder what lay beyond. On the whole, he was happy. But then there came this one different day. Today, the boy brought the cows to the pasture, as he had always done, without any knowledge that on this occasion, his life would change forever.

The pasture looked the same. The cows started to graze as they always did. The boy sat down as he usually would, but then a singular event occurred. A rope descended from the rock cliff just above the pasture. Then, to the boy's continuing amazement, a young girl started to climb down the rope. She was holding a stool and a bucket.

The boy hid behind a large rock in the pasture. The girl reached the pasture floor, walked over to the cows, and sat on her stool, placing her bucket under a cow, and coaxed the milk from the cow. When the cow had filled her bucket, she proceeded to the rope and ascended. The boy watched with incredulity.

All the rest of that day and into that night, the boy wondered about the strange girl from the cliff above. What was she doing? Where was she from? Why would she take the milk from the cows - milk that clearly belonged to someone else? Finally, after turning these ideas over and over in his mind, he resolved to

watch and wait for the milk maiden to see if she would come back.

She did. The very next day, just after he arrived at the pasture, she came down the rope and milked a cow. Then, she left as abruptly as she came.

On the third day, the boy's observational focus had become extreme. He was now making up his mind that if she came again, he would detain her. He genuinely needed to find out what was going on.

She came. The boy leaped out from his hiding rock and apprehended her.

"What are you doing? That is the milk of the farmer," he said, "and you are just taking it without permission."

The milk maiden said nothing. She looked intently into the farm boy's eyes for what seemed like an eternity, then simply said, "I will come to live with you, if you allow me to go back up the rope once more."

The boy did not know what to say. He was not expecting this. She would live with him? He did not ask this. He just wanted to know what she was doing? After all, she was stealing milk. And now, instead of explaining herself, she said that she would live with him? So, the boy just stood and stared. Suddenly, he found his mouth saying, "Alright."

So, the girl proceeded to milk a cow and go back up the rope.

Another day passed, then another. On the third day, she came back. This time she climbed down the rope without the milking pail or the stool. But she did have a small box, about the size of a book. She came over to the boy and explained, "I will stay with you as long as you do not look into this box until I say."

The boy agreed, and so they lived together ... in the same room, for quite some time.

On many days, the girl would leave the room and the boy would stare at the box she had brought and wonder what it contained.

But he never, never looked inside, until this one day.

She was gone and the boy could wait no longer. He crossed the room, opened the box, and looked inside. Afraid that she would come into the room and see him, he quickly closed the box and put it back just as it had been.

The girl came back into the room, looked at the boy, then the box, then spoke directly to the boy, saying, "I must leave." Taking up the box, she walked out toward the setting sun and was never seen again.

*At this point the babysitter would always say to the children, "And do you know why the milk maiden left?" The she would add emphatically, "It was **not** because the farm boy looked into the box!" Then, with a dramatic pause, she would finish, "It was because he didn't see anything in the box."*

With that, the babysitter was finished. Now, I personally need to add something. When I was told this story, I was in a room of adults. I'm pretty sure that none of us knew exactly what the story meant. And I'm also pretty sure that we all had the same questions. First of all, how did she know he had looked in the box. Was there something or things in the box? If there was, why didn't he see anything? And most of all, why would his not seeing be grounds for her to leave?

This beautiful, mysterious story has stirred in me for almost half a century, now. So, I give it to you. I don't have the answers. But it makes me respect the unseen and watch and look at life even more carefully than ever before. It causes me to wonder.



References

Van der Post, L. (1961). *The Heart of the Hunter ... With drawings by Maurice Wilson*. Pp. 254. Hogarth Press: London.