

The Backwater Blooper

"Mom, please take me with you," was a frequent cry heard by Elizabeth's parents because Elizabeth loved to travel. Her dad didn't like to travel, and it seemed to Elizabeth that he never did anything fun and was always bossing her around and giving unwanted advice. Elizabeth's mom, on the other hand, was an international traveling doctor and would take Elizabeth with her on trips.

The place she wanted to visit most was India. Elizabeth had read about a special group of rivers, inlets and lakes that form a network of waterways in Kerala, a state in the southern part of India. These waterways are called the backwaters. It was one of Elizabeth's dreams to take a boat trip through these backwaters.

When Elizabeth was in seventh grade, her mother received an assignment to southern India. Elizabeth implored her mother to make her dream come true, saying it might be her only chance to see India. Her mom and dad finally consented to let her go on the condition that Elizabeth stay focused at school and earn excellent reports from all of her teachers. "If you don't do well in school, you'll be staying home with your dad," echoed in her mind from that moment on.

Schoolwork was nothing but an irritation to Elizabeth, but she would rather be doing anything than listen to her dad bug her about what she could or couldn't do. Elizabeth knew how hard school was going to be for her, but she decided it would be worth the work if she could reap the reward of getting that trip to India and have some time out from under her dad's thumb.

Elizabeth worked very hard keeping her grades up, but she grew exhausted and began to tire by the time winter break rolled around. She was sorely in need of a break, but thoughts about going on a dream trip to India kept her spirits buoyed and her tired mind on track. She felt like she was floating on air when her dad finally agreed that Elizabeth had done well enough to make the trip. Elizabeth was going to India!

Elizabeth and her mom finally reached the mouth of the backwaters in Kerala. They had trouble finding a houseboat to hire, but her mom talked an older man named Amir into using his own boat for the trip, with himself as their guide. He had just returned from a backwater trip.

They set off on their cruise under the rising tropical sun. Exotic birds and howling monkeys made music far and near in the surrounding tropical forest. Amir guided the boat carefully through smooth, dark waters.

Everything was exactly what Elizabeth was hoping for - sunshine, free time,

swimming in the river, and exploring the river banks whenever she could get to shore. Elizabeth's mother loved to cook and made wonderful meals for the three traveling companions. Amir made sure the boat stayed on course while answering Elizabeth's constant questions about the plants, animals, and people who lived along the river.

Amir constantly fussed at Elizabeth for swimming too much, which slowed the boat trip down, and especially for leaving the boat to explore when they were docked. "You should not go so far from the boat. You stay close. It's dangerous out there."

Elizabeth just glared at Amir, thinking about her dad whenever she felt him nagging at her again. Elizabeth's mom sided with Elizabeth and told Amir that Elizabeth was her daughter and that she didn't need him telling her daughter what to do. Amir angrily hunched his shoulders, grumbled into his beard, and focused on his steering.

It was on the third day that Elizabeth heard a strange noise in the distance. "Bloooooooooo-whoop, bloooooooooo-whoop," went the sound. Elizabeth went to ask Amir what kind of animal could be making that curious call. Maybe it was a monkey she'd never heard before. She stepped to the stern of the boat where Amir sat steering and started to ask, "Amir, what on Earth is that..." when a sudden sputtering sound came from beneath the boat, and the engine stopped, leaving the boat drifting toward shore in silence.

Amir jumped down to the engine room, and they could hear him muttering angrily to himself as he clanged noisily while tinkering with the engine. Finally, he popped his head up and said, "Got it! No problem to fix, but it will take a while. You two relax. Be comfortable." Then he ducked back down the hatch. Almost immediately, though, his head popped up again, and he gave a parting admonition to Elizabeth, "You, stay in the boat! Okay?" Without waiting for an answer, he disappeared again.

Elizabeth's mom said, "Since we're going to be here a while, I'll go make some fresh fruit salads. Hey, Eliz, there's a gorgeous mango tree coming up over there on the bank. When the boat drifts under it, pick a couple of big ones for our salad, okay?" and she disappeared into the galley.

Elizabeth bounced over to the side rail of the boat to wait for them to float under the heavily fruited mango tree, but it was taking way too long, and Elizabeth began to get antsy. Why couldn't she just hop over the rail, swim to shore, and climb up the tree to get the best fruit? She looked back over her shoulder at the open hatch where she heard her mom humming to herself in the galley and Amir clanking away in the engine room. She smiled to herself and dropped into the cool water with hardly a splash.

She squished up the soft bank and found a tree heavily laden with fruit. She clamored up the tree and reached for a big juicy mango but stopped short when she heard that strange noise again, "Bloooooooooo-whoop, bloooooooooo-whoop." Elizabeth turned her

head, scanning the scenery for what might be making such an unusual sound, but the chattering of birds and monkeys were the only things she heard, so she turned her attention back to picking the sweet smelling fruit.

She plucked two mangos that were so enormous she needed both hands to hold them. With some difficult maneuvering and scraped shins, Elizabeth scooted back down the tree with her two tasty prizes to share for lunch.

She had just started for the boat when she heard the strange sound again, but this time it was very close by. Elizabeth stepped through the thick brush to search for the source of the mysterious noise. "Bloooooo-whoop, blooooo-whoop," the sound drew her on through the forest until she saw a sudden movement which made her freeze.

She was surprised to see that it was a young boy gracefully leaping up a mango tree. His beautiful white teeth gleamed in his sweet brown face as he smiled at her and said, "Beautiful day, isn't it? It looks like mango heaven over here, doesn't it? Here's one for you," and he tossed her the biggest one he'd picked. "I'm Sanjay," he said as he hopped down with his fruit. He held out his hand, "What may I call you?"

"Oh, um, Elizabeth. My name's Elizabeth," she said as she responded to his smile and shook his outstretched hand.

"Nice to meet you, Elizabeth. Was I scary, or is it the abundance of luscious fresh fruit that has left you speechless," he asked, giggling at her.

"Well, it's just that eerie sound that startled me. What's causing that sound?"

"You mean the bloop?" Sanjay cupped his hands around his mouth and called out again, "Bloooooo-whoop, blooooo-whoop," exactly as she'd heard it before. "That's to keep the tigers away, of course."

"There are.... there are tigers here?" asked Elizabeth, not certain whether or not to really believe him.

"There are," he said nodding his head. "They could be anywhere out here in the backwater. It's isolated out here. We're not close to any cities or towns, you know."

"You can't be serious," said Elizabeth, still not entirely believing Sanjay's story. "You expect me to believe that there are tigers all over the place..."

Sanjay silently interrupted her when he suddenly crouched down among the bushes, leaving her standing alone.

"Get down," he whispered, "here comes one now. Get down!" She rolled her eyes, sighed and played along, if only to meet him at eye level to demand the truth.

"Shhhh," he whispered. A soft rustling in the bushes about twenty feet away broke the silence. Elizabeth tried to fix her gaze where Sanjay was looking when, amidst the sunlight and shadow and the plants and tree trunks, she suddenly saw a long, striped body

gliding smoothly across the forest floor.

The tiger turned his gaze toward his human observers, and suddenly the tiger's yellow eyes locked with Elizabeth's. Its hypnotizing eyes stared right into hers, freezing her blood to the core. Slowly turning toward her, it started to take a step when Sanjay let out another, "Bloooooo-whoop, bloooooo-whoop!" The startled tiger broke its gaze, turned away, and slid quietly back into the bush.

As Elizabeth watched the tiger's tail disappear in the distant underbrush, she discovered herself trembling with fear. She exclaimed, "That was the most amazing, most petrifying, most beautiful, scariest thing I have ever seen in my life!" Her heart was beating like a trip hammer.

Sanjay gently turned Elizabeth away from the tiger. Picking up her dropped fruit and putting them in her arms he said, "Well, now you have these to sweeten the experience!" They both turned when they heard the sound of an engine starting.

"The boat!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "I have to get back!" They both smiled broadly at each other over the terrifying tiger experience they had shared. "Thank you, Sanjay, keep blooping!" she shouted to him over her shoulder as she started running back to the boat. Elizabeth hopped onto the boat deck.

"Where have you been?" exclaimed Amir gruffly, his gray bushy brows drawn together in anger. "I thought I told you to stay on the boat!"

"You did, you did, and you're right, Amir," Elizabeth said, somewhat embarrassed. "I think I'll be staying much closer to the boat from now on." She smiled at him as she passed by him on her way to the galley to give the luscious fruit to her mom. Surprised at her agreeability, Amir grunted and nodded his head, somewhat pleased. His anger with her willful ways dissipated. He was satisfied that he had succeeded at last in making a strong impression on this most difficult girl.

1. What kind of work did Elizabeth's mother do?

- A. She was a professional traveler.
- B. She was an international doctor.
- C. She worked for a big company.

- 2. What place in India was Elizabeth most interest in?**
 - A. The backwaters.
 - B. The rivers.
 - C. The forests.

- 3. How did Elizabeth feel about her dad staying home rather than going on the trip?**
 - A. She thought he needed some time alone and was happy for him.
 - B. She didn't care whether he came along on the trip or not.
 - C. She was glad that she could get away from his nagging.

- 4. How did Elizabeth feel about her experience with the tiger?**
 - A. There were both good and bad things about it.
 - B. It was something she never wanted to repeat.
 - C. It was a really bad experience for her.

- 5. Why did Sanjay make the strange Bloooooooo-whoop sound?**
 - A. To let tigers know that humans were looking at them.
 - B. To let other people know there were tigers around.
 - C. To scare off any tigers that might be in the area.

- 6. What happened right after Elizabeth first heard the Bloooooooo-Whoop sound?**
 - A. The boat engine sputtered and stopped.
 - B. She went to Amir to ask him what it was.
 - C. The boat started to drift toward the shore.

- 7. Why was Elizabeth so excited about getting a chance to go to India?**
 - A. It would be her only chance to see India.
 - B. It was the place she most wanted to visit.
 - C. She'd heard India was an exciting place.

- 8. Why did Elizabeth work so hard in school?**
 - A. She wanted to get her teacher's approval.
 - B. She wanted to make her parents happy.
 - C. She wanted to get the reward of a trip.

- 9. What effect did the tiger scare have on Elizabeth?**
- A. She decided she would listen more to what Amir told her to do.
 - B. She decided to be more careful when she was exploring the area.
 - C. She decided she would stay on the boat most of time from now on.
- 10. How did Elizabeth's mother and father differ in the way they treated Elizabeth?**
- A. Her mother always let her do what she wanted, and her father didn't.
 - B. Her father was very strict, and her mother was less strict.
 - C. Her mother didn't care what she did, but her father cared a lot.
- 11. What did Elizabeth look forward to most when she arrived in India?**
- A. Being free to do whatever she wanted.
 - B. Learning about the animals and people.
 - C. Sunshine, swimming, and exploring.
- 12. How did Elizabeth react when Sanjay first told her about tigers in the area?**
- A. She couldn't decide whether to believe him.
 - B. She was positive he was just teasing her.
 - C. She was afraid he was probably correct.
- 13. What best tells how Elizabeth felt about her father?**
- A. She thought he was too strict and overbearing.
 - B. She felt the only thing he cared about was bugging her.
 - C. She felt that he cared about her, but he wasn't fair.
- 14. Why did Elizabeth find it hard to talk with Sanjay when she first met him?**
- A. He surprised her by how he introduced himself.
 - B. She wasn't expecting to see someone in a mango tree.
 - C. She was startled by the Bloooooo-whoop sound.

15. What was Elizabeth's father probably like?

- A. He didn't care what Elizabeth did as long as she followed his rules.
- B. He cared about Elizabeth and felt that being strict was best for her.
- C. He didn't like Elizabeth very much, so he made things hard for her.

16. What was Elizabeth like?

- A. She was curious, adventuresome, and willing to disobey to get what she wanted.
- B. She would get so caught up in her adventures that she would forget about all else.
- C. She was disobedient around her father but did exactly what her mother told her to do.

17. What scared Elizabeth the most about the tiger?

- A. The way its long striped body moved through the forest.
- B. The look in its eyes when it stared directly at her.
- C. How the tiger was able to sneak up on her and Sanjay.

18. What best describes how Amir felt at the end of the story?

- A. He felt as though he had finally gotten through to Elizabeth about listening to him.
- B. He thought Elizabeth's mother must have spoken to her about listening to him more.
- C. He was happy with Elizabeth's attitude and knew she wouldn't be a problem again.

19. Why did Elizabeth glare at Amir when he told her that she should not get off the boat to go exploring?

- A. She thought people should mind their own business.
- B. It reminded her of what her dad might have said.
- C. She thought he was purposefully being mean to her.

20. What was this story mostly about?

- A. How adults from different countries make similar rules for children.
- B. How a girl's dream trip to a foreign country came true finally.
- C. How a girl learned the value of respecting the advice of others.