

CHAPTER 1

The Ox Race

Do you know any fun facts about your city? (*Allow response.*) I have some fun facts about different places in the world. Did you know that a city in the USA called Battle Creek, Michigan makes more breakfast cereal than any other city in the world? Australia is the country with the most poisonous animals known to man. People in England drink more tea than people in any other country. Do you know which country has the most children? (*Allow response.*) It's India. This week we will be learning a story about a boy in India named Ringu (*RIN-goo*).

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Ringu attached the oxen to the cart as his father, mother and little brother, Battu (*Bah-TOO*), climbed in. They were going to the bazaar (marketplace). Many people would be there because it was the last market day in this Indian village before the big celebration to worship the oxen. Ringu and Battu were excited. Ringu had a little extra spring in his step, though, because he was going to drive the ox cart!

The oxen slowly walked along through the forest and Ringu looked around at the trees. He was watching for scary things that lurked in the woods. He knew there were tigers. And his people were even more afraid of evil spirits, who they worshipped and tried very hard to please. Ringu was glad it was daytime. The forest became even scarier at night.

They reached the main road and Ringu forgot his fears as he urged the oxen to go faster. "Get going!" he shouted. "Show us what you can do!" Deep down inside, Ringu really just wanted to show everyone that his oxen were very fast. He was confident that he would win the race during the Festival of the Oxen. The oxen broke into a run and the dust swirled. Battu enjoyed this fast-paced ride. Their parents on the other hand were not amused!

Ringu slowed the oxen to a walk at the edge of town. He wanted to see where the missionary from another land lived. Ringu had seen him once. He was very tall, with fair skin and light brown hair. His name was Grubbs Sahib. People said he taught about just one God and that people needed to know Him instead of always trying to please the evil spirits. *Is this true?* wondered Ringu as they passed the mission.

"Let's hurry," Battu begged as they got closer to the bazaar.

Everyone stand up and let's pretend to walk to the bazaar. Let's walk in place. Hold on to the oxen or they will get away! Do you see the bazaar there in the distance? I do. Let's run the rest of the way! (*Do with children.*) Great job, boys and girls! You may sit down.

Soon Ringu and his family were in town. They tied the oxen to one of the cart wheels and started toward the bazaar. Suddenly Battu heard someone cry out as if in pain!

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It was Ringu! He jumped back and grabbed his foot. A long thorn was sticking out of his heel. He flinched as he yanked it out then hurried to catch up with the family.

Ringu and Battu followed close behind their father while he bought cords with pompoms and bells to put around the oxen's necks and chunks of brown sugar to feed them on the day of the festival. Then Father bought coconuts to offer to the evil spirits in case anyone got sick.

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Battu walked and Ringu limped around the bazaar looking at the different things on sale and wishing they had money to buy them all. When no one was looking, Ringu quickly slipped a banana into his pocket. He knew it was wrong to steal but everyone steals sometimes, right? (*Allow response.*)

Suddenly beautiful music distracted the boys from their shopping. Ringu saw a crowd gathering so he grabbed Battu's arm and hurried toward the music, not caring how much his foot hurt. Battu hurried after him, dodging people who were in their way. Just then Ringu bumped into a man. The papers the man was carrying fell to the ground. Frightened, Ringu started to run. But the man gently grabbed his arm.

"Come, my friend."

Ringu stopped and stared. It was the tall missionary he had heard about, Grubbs Sahib!

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The missionary scooped up the papers, giving one to Ringu. "We have come to tell you about the one true God, who made us," he said. "This paper has words from God, who sent His only Son, Jesus, to take the punishment for all our sins. Jesus sets us free from the power of evil spirits."

Ringu and Battu each grabbed a paper then remembered why they were there. The music! They turned to watch the man who was making the beautiful sound.

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The man had a strange looking box. He pushed some buttons on one side of the box and pulled the other side, making beautiful music. Ringu had never heard anything so wonderful.

The man stopped playing and stood up. "My name is Pandu (*pahn-DOO*)," he said. "I used to make many offerings to the evil spirits and bow down to false gods just like you do. I used to celebrate the Festival of the Oxen and worship them. I made clay statues of the oxen to put in front of my house just like you will do in three days. Then I met the one true God, who has power over the evil spirits. He commands that we worship no other gods but Him."

Pandu kept talking but Battu tugged at Ringu's arm. "Let's go. This is bad to hear. The evil spirits will be angry," he whispered.

But what if it's true? When I learn to read, I will read these words from God and find out. Ringu was curious about this "one true God." He had never heard of such a thing before. He unwound his turban, carefully placed the paper in its folds and wrapped it around his head again.

Ringu's foot hurt more than ever as he and Battu went back to their father.

"You're limping," his father said. "Your foot is all right, isn't it, my son?"

"I'm fine," insisted Ringu. He was determined to run as quickly as he could because he wanted his father to be proud. *But will the evil spirits make my foot so bad that I can't run at all?* worried Ringu. He tried to think of other things as he drifted off to sleep that night.

Ringu woke up to the sound of beating drums on the day of the Festival of the Oxen. He looked at his aching foot. The heel was swollen, red and ugly. Ringu stepped on it carefully. His foot throbbed as he limped to the front porch.

Ringu sat down on the porch, thinking, *Why are the evil spirits so angry with me?* A sob caught in Ringu's throat. He so badly wanted to make his father proud.

His mother stood beside him. "What's the matter, my son?"

"My foot," Ringu said, holding back tears. "It hurts and I have to run the race. I just have to!"

She looked at his foot for a moment then called his father.

What does your family do when someone is sick or injured? (*Allow response.*)

Ringu's family did something very different.

His father took one look at the foot and hurried to get the witch doctor. The witch doctor was an important leader in their village. The people believed his magic could cure sickness.

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Battu came out of the house and the two boys trembled in fear as they saw the witch doctor approach. He was bent over with wooden beads and knotted strings around his neck. One long lock of hair was loose from his tightly wound turban.

Ringu was afraid. The witch doctor chanted as he tied a piece of string around Ringu's ankle. It was like the string Ringu wore around his neck. All the people in his village believed that wearing one would keep evil spirits away.

Ringu's father dropped a few coins into the witch doctor's hand. Everyone knew it was important to pay the witch doctor. If you didn't pay, nothing good would happen!

"Ah, but you must offer a coconut too," the witch doctor said as he left.

Ringu was glad his father had bought coconuts at the bazaar the day before. After Father broke one open and offered it to the rock idol, Ringu's foot would *have* to get better!

"When the coconut milk spills over the rocks," Battu assured Ringu, "the village gods will be happy!"

Ringu thought of the words of the missionary and Pandu. He unwound his turban and took out the paper with God's words. Because he was learning the letters of the Hindi alphabet in school, he could recognize some of them on the paper. He couldn't read the sentences though. Ringu thought about what Pandu had said about the one true God: "He commands that we worship no other gods but Him."

Oh, how Ringu wanted to know what the paper said! But worried thoughts crowded his mind. *Terrible things will happen if we don't please the evil spirits by obeying the witch doctor. How else will my foot get well? And will the oxen do their work if no clay statues are made and no honor given to them?*

It was time for the oxen to get one last bath before the big race. Battu brought them over and Ringu got up off the porch. His foot hurt more than ever! How could he race? Tears stung his eyes but he forced himself to walk without limping.

He washed the oxen at the river and sharp jabs of pain shot up Ringu's leg. He let himself limp as they started back to the house.

"Is your foot worse?" Battu asked anxiously. "Will you be able to run in the race?"

"I'll be fine," Ringu answered as he clenched the ropes and walked as normally as he could.

At last it was time for the race. His foot hurt terribly but Ringu held his head high, gritted his teeth and smiled as he walked proudly beside the oxen to the starting place.

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At the signal, the oxen were off! Everyone urged his team on. Ringu yelled, twisting his oxen's tails, and the animals broke into a gallop. He held onto the reins tightly and ran behind the oxen as they almost jerked his arms from their sockets.

Everyone stand up. Put your hands out in front of you and hold on tightly to the reins of the oxen. Now run in place as fast as you can. (*Do with children.*) You may sit down.

Ringu passed a few of the teams then stumbled and started to fall. But the speed of the oxen swept him to his feet again. He gripped the reins tighter and yelled, half with pain and half with excitement. Finally with a burst of speed he pulled ahead of all the others and won the race!

Battu jumped up and down and Ringu grinned widely as garlands of flowers were hung around the oxen's necks. Even though the spirits hadn't made Ringu's foot better, he had won! He looked toward his father and saw him smiling. Yes, his father was very proud of him!

Back at home Ringu sat weakly on the rope bed on the front porch with the family around him. He was tired and his foot was making him sick. His father patted his shoulder. "You ran well, my son. I am proud of you. But your foot is not better. We have done something to anger the spirits. We must send for the witch doctor again."

The witch doctor arrived quickly. He untied a small sack that had many strange things in it. The witch doctor used them to try to drive away the evil spirits. He tossed some dried red pepper into the air.

"Ah-choo! Ah-choo! Ah-choo!" Ringu sneezed. On the count of three, everyone pretend to sneeze. One, two, three! (*Do with children.*) Great job.

"Good!" the witch doctor exclaimed. "That will help drive out the evil spirits."

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Then the witch doctor pulled Ringu toward him and blew forcefully into Ringu's ear several times. It hurt but Ringu knew it was supposed to make the evil spirits leave.

Next the witch doctor took out a peacock's feather and tied it around Ringu's ankle. Finally he opened a bottle and poured something from it on the sore foot. From a little bag he sprinkled some black powdery stuff over the liquid then rubbed it hard into the wound.

Ringu shrieked in pain.

"That's good!" the witch doctor said. "The yells will scare away the evil spirits." Then he chanted some strange words in a singsong voice.

Ringu sobbed quietly. *The spirits are never satisfied, he thought. I need to learn to read soon so I can find out about the sahib's God.*

Then a thought startled him. If the evil spirits made his foot worse, he couldn't go to school anymore. Then what would happen?

Cliffhanger

What will happen? Will Ringu's foot get worse? Will he ever learn about the words from God? Come back tomorrow to find out!

Review Questions

1. Where did Ringu live? (*India.*)
2. What was on the paper from the missionary? (*Words from God.*)
3. Why couldn't Ringu read the paper? (*He didn't know how to read.*)
4. What did Ringu and his family think caused the problems with his foot? (*Evil spirits.*)
5. Who did the family get to try to help Ringu's foot? (*A witch doctor.*)