

The Remover of Difficulties

by Sylvan Perez

Anyone who has ever read Idries Shah's beloved *World Tales* may remember a story that begins:

"Once upon a time, not a thousand miles from here, there lived a poor old woodcutter, who was a widower, and his little daughter..."

This is the tale of Mushkil Gusha: the Remover of Difficulties.

Gorgeously illustrated and stitched together from stories across the world, *World Tales* was one of the great tutors of my childhood. When I stumbled across a copy identical to the one we'd owned, I snapped it up in a heartbeat. I wish I still had a young child in my life to share it with, but my own son is grown and gone. This tale feels like a family heirloom.

Each Thursday, my father would gather us around. We'd share dried fruit—a rare treat, back when dates might be the sweetest thing I'd taste all week: and he would perform the story. With love. With ritual. With just enough solemnity to make it feel like magic.

At first glance, Mushkil Gusha is a parable about gratitude. You tell the tale, you share your fruit, and the gifts keep flowing. But like all Sufi teaching stories, it's both more complex and more elemental than it first appears.

I now read it as a kind of spiritual software, a recursive line of sacred code meant to be run inside the human psyche. Told regularly, it keeps the soul supple. Forgotten, it closes a door.

This isn't performative gratitude, the kind modern self-help peddles. This is ritualized remembrance. Storytelling as sacrament. Gratitude here isn't just an emotion. It's sustenance. As vital as air. As grounding as bread. And if you don't keep feeding it, the spirit begins to faint. The door stays shut.



In Shah's version, the woodcutter and his daughter live in deep poverty. The daughter, described as a bit spoiled (but aren't we all, once we've tasted something sweeter?), complains that she wants something different to eat.

Soon after, fortune shifts. A mysterious stranger (our titular Mushkil Gusha) appears, offers sustenance, and instructs them to tell this tale each Thursday, sharing a piece of fruit while doing so. As long as they remember, things improve. When they forget, things unravel.

What struck me even as a child was that the woodcutter returns home three times, only to find the door barred and his daughter gone. He's locked out of his life, his rhythm disrupted. It feels like he's repeating a meaningless cycle. He wanders, exhausted. Hope has failed. Grief has failed. Even seeking has failed.

It is only when he falls asleep: slipping into that liminal space where ego lets go, that he is invited into the story's sacred interior.

A voice asks, "What are you doing?"

He answers with his tale.

And just like that, he's told to climb an invisible staircase, blind and trusting. At the top, he finds himself in a palace of light, its floor glittering with multicolored pebbles. He is told: take as many as you can carry.

He descends, still blind, and wakes to find himself back home. His daughter is there. Hungry. They eat dates. He tells her the story.

But she doesn't understand. To her, the fantastical parts make it seem unreal. She wasn't there. She hasn't lived it. Maybe she hasn't even begun to question the meaning of her day-to-day life.

Here the tale reveals its deeper mechanism: it must be retold, even when it doesn't make sense. Even when the listener doubts. Even when we ourselves forget what it meant the last time. That's the trick. That's the key. Mushkil Gusha is not really a character in this story. He is the story itself. A line of spiritual code. And telling the story runs the program.

In this way, the benign virus migrates through thousands of years of human consciousness, basically intact. And when we become aware of such phenomena, that's the place to start looking for truth. For lies, effective though they sometimes are, often harm the receiver, like a virus after delivering their payload, often destroying itself in the process. The telling of the lie is of little use, even to the lie itself. The truth Lives on in a way which lies do not.

And beneath that metaphor lives a simpler truth: gratitude is how we eat. Not just physically, but cosmically. It's how we metabolize grace. It keeps the gate open.

As the tale unfolds, fortune continues to smile on the woodcutter and his daughter, but with rising comfort comes spiritual amnesia. They forget to tell the tale. They forget to share the fruit.

Their neighbors, mistaking their spiritual glow for greed, grow resentful. The woodcutter is accused of theft. His daughter is sent to an orphanage. He is chained, pilloried in public.

After many weeks in shackles, a new Thursday rolls around. Remembering his vow, the woodcutter asks a passing stranger not for alms, but for a piece of fruit in exchange for a story. The man listens, skeptical, but the deed is done. In classic Sufi fashion, the tale of this random benefactor breaks off, suddenly: "he leaves our story here." He's now infected with the code. What happens next is between him and the Beloved.

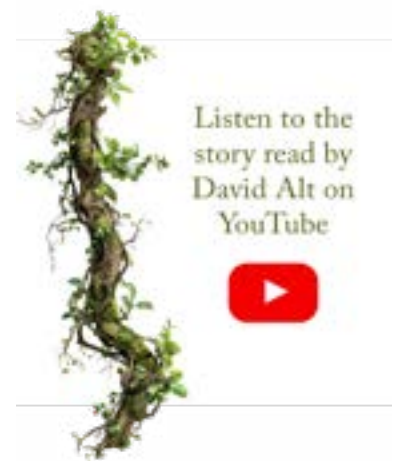
The woodcutter returns home. Everything has changed. Unasked-for abundance waits at his doorstep once more. He is freed from the chains and restored. The "stolen" necklace is found. His daughter returns to the Princess' side.

From a modern, cynical lens it may feel pat. But the real ending is stranger, and more eternal:

"These are some of the incidents in the story of Mushkil Gusha. It is a very long tale and it has never ended. It has many forms. Some of them are not even called the story of Mushkil Gusha at all... But it is because of Mushkil Gusha that this story, in whatever form, is remembered by somebody, somewhere in the world, day and night, wherever there are people..."

As a child, I assumed Mushkil Gusha was the name of the woodcutter. I thought God only had one name. But now I see: both the Divine and the story itself are Mushkil Gusha. The Remover of Difficulties. A living tradition. A replicating tale meant to be passed like fire, not archived like scripture.

I haven't always kept the Thursday ritual. But I've told this story to friends. Lovers. Strangers over bread and wine, in joy and in doubt. And every time, I feel the code running again in me.



Recently, I found myself deep in the metaphorical woods: still aching from the loss of someone radiant. Still reeling from a breakup that blew a hole in the map of my life. I'd made a major life change: intuitive and brave, but destabilizing. Everything felt locked. Barred. I was the woodcutter again, wandering. Petulant. Exhausted. Time and again I would try the door and it felt barred from the inside.

And then I started speaking again.

Not praying. Not asking. Just telling. My version of the story, though I didn't call it Mushkil Gusha. I began to name my gratitude. I remembered the gifts that had already saved me more than once. I walked, blindly, up the invisible stairs.

And somewhere along the way, the pebbles I'd been dragging turned to gems.

The room I called a cell revealed itself to be a palace.

So I will keep telling this tale.

In poems. In kitchens.

In emails sent in the dark.

In tender words whispered over a pillow.

Not because I expect more from the universe,

but because this string of code reminds me of what I already have.

Because many of our monsters are self-written.

And many of our salvations begin with a single sentence.

Because some truths, when spoken aloud, become food.

Because gratitude is sustenance.

Because, even though there are parts of this journey strange and alien to us all, there are also parts which will feel familiar from tale to tale,

And lift us up in this way. Nourish us. And when we share it, we multiply it.

And because—it may be Thursday...Would you like a date?

You can follow Sylvan through his Substack channel [The Corner of a Dot.](#)