

Engine Trouble

R. K. Narayan

Born in Madras, **R. K. Narayan** (1906–2001) was one of the best first-generation Indian novelists who wrote in English. Narayan published more than ten novels and short stories. His works have been translated into several Indian and European languages and are widely read even today. Narayan created an imaginary town named Malgudi, which forms the setting of most of his work. Narayan is well-known for the direct simplicity of his language, his realistic settings and even more realistic characters. He was sometimes compared to the American writer Faulkner for his compassionate humanism and celebration of ordinary life. Some of his best-known works are *The Guide*, *Swami and Friends*, *Malgudi Days*, and a critically acclaimed translation of the *Ramayana*.

About the story

‘Engine Trouble’ is a delightful story set in Malgudi. The narrator is the Talkative Man who is a familiar character in Narayan’s short stories. The story is a hilarious series of misfortunes which occur when the protagonist wins an engine in a fair and attempts to dispose it off. Perhaps Narayan wants to suggest that luck can be a double-edged sword because for the narrator the so-called luck brings nothing but bad luck.

There came down to our town some years ago (said the Talkative Man) a showman owning an institution called the Gaiety Land. Overnight our Gymkhana Ground became resplendent with banners and streamers and coloured lamps. From all over the district crowds poured into the show. Within a week of opening, in gate money alone they collected nearly five hundred rupees a day. Gaiety Land provided us with all sorts of fun and gambling and side-shows. For a couple of *annas* in each booth we could watch anything from

performing parrots to crack motor-cyclists looping the loop in the Dome of Death. In addition to this there were lotteries and shooting galleries, where for an *anna* you always stood a chance of winning a hundred rupees.

There was a particular corner of the show which was in great favour. Here, for a ticket costing eight *annas*, you stood a chance of acquiring a variety of articles—pincushions, sewing machines, cameras or even a road-engine. On one evening they drew a ticket number 1005, and I happened to own the other half of the ticket. Glancing down the list of articles they declared that I became the owner of the road-engine . . .! Don't ask me how a road-engine came to be included among the prizes. It is more than I can tell you.

I looked stunned. People gathered around and gazed at me as if I were some curious animal. 'Fancy anyone becoming the owner of a road-engine . . .!' Some persons muttered and giggled.

It was not the sort of prize one could carry home at short notice. I asked the showman if he would help me to transport it. He merely pointed at a notice which decreed that all winners should remove the prizes immediately on drawing and by their own effort.

However, they had to make an exception in my case. They agreed to keep the engine on the Gymkhana Grounds till the end of their season and then I would have to make my own arrangements to take it out. When I asked the showman if he could find me a driver he just smiled: 'The fellow who brought it here had to be paid a hundred rupees for the job and five rupees a day. I sent him away and made up my mind that if no one was going to draw it, I would just leave it to its fate. I got it down just as a novelty for the show. God..! What a bother it has proved . . .!'

'Can't I sell it to some municipality . . .?' I asked innocently. He burst into a laugh. 'As a showman I have enough troubles with the municipal people. I would rather keep out of their way.'

My friends and well-wishers poured in to congratulate me on my latest acquisition. No one knew precisely how much a road-engine would fetch; all the same they felt that there was a lot of money in it. 'Even if you sell it as scrap-iron you can make a few thousands', some of my friends declared. Every day I made a trip to the Gymkhana Grounds to have a look at my engine. I grew very

fond of it. I loved its shining brass parts. I stood near it and patted it affectionately, hovered about it, and returned home every day only at the close of the show. I was a poor man. I thought that after all my troubles were coming to an end. How ignorant we are! How little did I guess that my troubles had just begun.

When the showman took down his booths and packed up, I received a notice from the municipality to attend to my road-engine. When I went there next day it looked forlorn with no one about. The ground was littered with torn streamers and paper decorations. The showman had moved on, leaving the engine where it stood. It was perfectly safe anywhere!

*made
outside*

I left it alone for a few days, not knowing what to do with it. I received a notice from the municipality ordering that the engine should at once be removed from the ground as otherwise they would charge rent for the occupation of the Gymkhana Ground. After deep thought I consented to pay the rent, and I paid ten rupees a month for the next three months. Dear sirs, I was a poor man. Even the house which I and my wife occupied cost me only four rupees a month. And fancy my paying ten rupees a month for the road-engine. It cut into my slender budget and I had to pledge a jewel or two belonging to my wife!

And every day my wife was asking me what I proposed to do with this terrible property of mine and I had no answer to give her. I went up and down the town offering it for sale to all and sundry. Someone suggested that the secretary of the local Cosmopolitan Club might be interested in it. When I approached him he laughed and asked what he should do with a road-engine. 'I'll dispose of it at a concession for you. You have a tennis court to be rolled every morning,' I began, and even before I saw him smile I knew it was a stupid thing to say. Next, someone suggested, 'See the Municipal Chairman. He may buy it for the municipality.' With great trepidation I went to the municipal office one day. I buttoned up my coat as I entered the Chairman's room and mentioned my business. I was prepared to give away the engine at a great concession. I started a great harangue on municipal duties, the regime of roller—but before I was done with him I knew there was greater chance of my selling it to some child on the roadside for playing with.

I saw the priest of the local temple and managed to gain his sympathy. He offered me the services of his temple elephant. I also engaged fifty coolies to push the engine from behind. You may be sure this drained all my resources. The coolies wanted eight annas per head and the temple elephant cost me seven rupees a day and I had to give it one feed. My plan was to take the engine out of the Gymkhana and then down the road to a field half a furlong off. The field was owned by a friend. He would not mind if I kept the engine there for a couple of months, when I could go to Madras and find a customer for it.

I also took into service one Joseph, a dismissed bus-driver, who said that although he knew nothing of road-rollers he could nevertheless steer one if it was somehow kept in motion. It was a fine sight: the temple elephant yoked to the engine by means of stout ropes, with fifty determined men pushing it from behind, and my friend Joseph sitting in the driving seat. A huge crowd stood around and watched in great glee. The engine began to move. It seemed to me the greatest moment in my life. When it came out of the Gymkhana and reached the road it began to behave in a strange manner. Instead of going straight down the road it showed a tendency to wobble and move zig-zag. The elephant dragged it one way, Joseph turned the wheel for all he was worth without any idea of where he was going, and fifty men behind it clung to it in every possible manner and pushed it just where they liked. As a result of all this confused dragging the engine ran straight into the opposite compound wall and reduced a good length of it to powder. At this the crowd let out a joyous yell. The elephant, disliking the behaviour of the crowd, trumpeted loudly, strained and snapped its ropes and kicked down a further length of the wall.

The fifty men fled in panic, the crowd created a pandemonium. Someone slapped me in the face—it was the owner of the compound wall. The police came on the scene and marched me off.

When I was released from the lock-up, I found the following consequences awaiting me: (1) Several yards of compound wall to be built by me; (2) Wages of fifty men who ran away. They would not explain how they were entitled to the wages when they had not done their job; (3) Joseph's fee for steering the engine over the wall;

(4) Cost of medicine for treating the knee of the temple elephant which had received some injuries while kicking down the wall. Here again the temple authorities would not listen when I pointed out that I didn't engage an elephant to break a wall; (5) Last, but not the least, the demand to move the engine out of its present station.

Sirs, I was a poor man. I really could not find any means of paying these bills. When I went home my wife asked: 'What is this I hear about you everywhere?' I took the opportunity to explain my difficulties. She took it as a hint that I was again asking for her jewels, and she lost her temper and cried that she would write to her father to come and take her away. I was at my wits' end. People smiled at me when they met me in the streets. I was seriously wondering why I should not run away to my village. I decided to encourage my wife to write to her father and arrange for her exit. Not a soul was going to know what my plans were. I was going to put off my creditors and disappear one fine night.

At this point came an unexpected relief in the shape of a *swamiji*. One fine evening under the distinguished patronage of our Municipal Chairman a show was held in our small town hall. It was a free performance and the hall was packed with people. I sat in the gallery. Spell-bound, we witnessed the *swamiji*'s yogic feats. He bit off glass tumblers and ate them with contentment; he lay on spike boards; gargled and drank all kinds of acids; licked white-hot iron rods; chewed and swallowed sharp nails; stopped his heartbeat, and buried himself underground. We sat there and watched him in stupefaction. At the end of it all he got up and delivered a speech in which he declared that he was carrying on his master's message to the people in this manner. His performance was more remarkable because he had nothing to gain by this extraordinary meal except the satisfaction of serving humanity, and now he said he was coming to the very masterpiece and the last act. He looked at the Municipal Chairman and asked: 'Have you a road-engine? I would like to have it driven over my chest.' The Chairman looked abashed and felt ashamed to acknowledge that he had none. The *swamiji* insisted, 'I must have a road-engine.'

The Municipal Chairman tried to put him off by saying 'There is no driver.' The *swamiji* replied, 'Don't worry about it. My assistant

has been trained to handle any kind of road-engine.' At this point I stood up in the gallery and shouted, 'Don't ask him for an engine. Ask me. . . .' In a moment I was on the stage and became as important a person as the fire eater himself. I was pleased with the recognition I now received from all quarters. The Municipal Chairman went into the background.

In return for lending him the engine he would drive it where I wanted. Though I felt inclined to ask for a money contribution I knew it would be useless to expect it from one who was on missionary work.

Soon the whole gathering was at the compound wall opposite the Gymkhana. *Swamiji*'s assistant was an expert in handling engines. In a short while my engine stood steaming up proudly. It was a gratifying sight. The *swamiji* called for two pillows, placed one near his head and the other at his feet. He gave detailed instructions as to how the engine should be run over him. He made a chalk mark on his chest and said, 'It must go exactly on this; not an inch this way or that.' The engine hissed and suddenly became unhappy and morose. This seemed to be a terrible thing to be doing. The *swamiji* lay down on the pillows and said, 'when I say "OM", drive it on.' He closed his eyes. The crowd watched tensely. I looked at the whole show in absolute rapture—after all, the road-engine was going to get on the move.

At this point a police inspector came into the crowd with a brown envelope in his hand. He held up his hand, beckoned to the *swamiji*'s assistant, and said: 'I am sorry I have to tell you that you can't go on with this. The magistrate has issued an order prohibiting the engine from running over him.' The *swamiji* picked himself up. There was a lot of commotion. The *swamiji* became indignant. 'I have done it in hundreds of places already and nobody questioned me about it. Nobody can stop me from doing what I like. It's my master's order to demonstrate the power of the yoga to the people of this country, and who can question me?'

'A magistrate can', said the police inspector, and held up the order. 'What business is it of yours or his to interfere in this manner?'

'I don't know all that; this is his order. He permits you to do everything except swallow potassium cyanide and run this engine over your chest. You are free to do whatever you like outside our jurisdiction.'

'I am leaving this cursed place this very minute,' the *swamiji* said in great rage, and started to go, followed by his assistant. I gripped his assistant's arm and said, 'You have steamed it up. Why not take it over to that field and then go.' He glared at me, shook off my hand and muttered, 'With my guru so unhappy, how dare you ask me to drive? He went away. I muttered, 'You can't drive it except over his chest, I suppose?'

I made preparations to leave the town in a couple of days, leaving the engine to its fate, with all its commitments. However, Nature came to my rescue in an unexpected manner. You may have heard of the earthquake of that year which destroyed whole towns in Northern India. There was a reverberation of it in our town, too. We were thrown out of our beds that night, and doors and windows rattled.

Next morning I went to take a last look at my engine before leaving the town. I could hardly believe my eyes. The engine was not there. I looked about and raised a hue and cry. Search parties went round. And the engine was found in a disused well nearby, with its back up. I prayed to heaven to save me from fresh complications. But the owner of the house when he came round and saw what had happened, laughed heartily and beamed at me: 'You have done me a service. It was the dirtiest water on earth in that well and the municipality was sending notice to close it, week after week. I was dreading the cost of closing, but your engine fits it like a cork. Just leave it there.'

'But, but. . . .' 'There are no "buts". I will withdraw all complaints and charges against you, and build that broken wall myself, but only leave the thing there.'

'That's hardly enough.' I mentioned a few other expenses that this engine had brought on me. He agreed to pay for all that. When I again passed that way some months later I peeped over the wall. I found the mouth of the well neatly cemented up. I heaved a sigh of great relief.

Glossary

<i>resplendent</i>	:	attractive; richly coloured; sumptuous
<i>annas</i>	:	a former monetary unit used in India, equivalent to one-sixteenth of a rupee
<i>crack</i>	:	here, expert
<i>road-engine</i>	:	road roller
<i>short notice</i>	:	a short time before something happens or needs to happen
<i>make up one's mind</i>	:	to decide
<i>novelty</i>	:	newness; strangeness
<i>acquisition</i>	:	something that one has bought or acquired
<i>littered</i>	:	made untidy
<i>consented</i>	:	agreed to
<i>pledge</i>	:	promise
<i>trepidation</i>	:	a nervous, excited state of mind
<i>concession</i>	:	something that is being given up at great cost to the owner
<i>harangue</i>	:	a lecture delivered in a forceful way
<i>yoked</i>	:	tied to
<i>wobble</i>	:	to move unsteadily
<i>pandemonium</i>	:	utter confusion
<i>lock-up</i>	:	jail
<i>at wit's end</i>	:	unable to think of a solution
<i>patronage</i>	:	an important person's support, usually financial in nature
<i>stupefaction</i>	:	loss of sensibility
<i>abashed</i>	:	confused
<i>gratifying</i>	:	satisfying; pleasing
<i>morose</i>	:	sullen
<i>rapture</i>	:	extreme pleasure or happiness
<i>commotion</i>	:	a sudden short period of noise or excitement
<i>indignant</i>	:	angry
<i>jurisdiction</i>	:	area over which the court or official organisation has authority
<i>glared</i>	:	looked fiercely
<i>reverberation</i>	:	echo
<i>heaved a sigh of relief</i>	:	to suddenly feel very happy because something unpleasant one expected to happen did not take place

Exercises

A. Answer the following questions in a sentence each.

1. Where did the narrator win the road engine?
2. What difficulties did the narrator face on the Gymkhana grounds after he won the road engine?
3. Whom did he try to sell the engine to?
4. How did the narrator plan to move the engine from the Gymkhana grounds?
5. Where did the engine end up after the earthquake?

B. Answer the following questions in about 30–40 words each.

1. Describe 'Gaiety land'.
2. Mention the consequences awaiting the storyteller when he came out of the lock-up.
3. What events led to the narrator's disappointment with the Swamiji?
4. How did nature come to the rescue of the narrator?

C. Answer the following questions in about 150 words each.

1. Describe the events that led to the imprisonment of the narrator.
2. Describe the various steps that the narrator took to get rid of the road engine .