




# *Like the Sun*

**R. K. Narayan**



Truth, Sekhar reflected, is like the sun. I suppose no human being can ever look it straight in the face without blinking or being dazed.

He realized that, morning till night, the essence of human relationships consisted in tempering truth so that it might not shock. This day he set apart as a unique day—at least one day in the year we must give and take absolute Truth whatever may happen. Otherwise life is not worth living. The day ahead seemed to him full of possibilities. He told no one of his experiment. It was a quiet resolve, a secret pact between him and eternity.

The very first test came while his wife served him his morning meal. He showed hesitation over a tidbit, which she had thought was her culinary masterpiece. She asked, “Why, isn’t it good?” At other times he would have said, considering her feelings in the matter, “I feel full up, that’s all.” But today he said, “It isn’t good. I’m unable to swallow it.” He saw her wince and said to himself, Can’t be helped. Truth is like the sun.

His next trial was in the common room when one of his colleagues came up and said, “Did you hear of the death of so-and-so? Don’t you think it a pity?” “No,” Sekhar answered. “He was such a fine



#### ◀ Vocabulary

**tempering** (tem' pər in)  
*n.* changing to make more suitable, usually by mixing with something

#### Spiral Review

**THEME** Based on the first two paragraphs, what thematic ideas do you think the author is developing? Explain.

### Irony and Paradox

Is the headmaster's request for Sekhar's feedback an example of irony? Why or why not?

### Vocabulary ►

**ingratiating** (in grā' shē āt' in) *adj.* acting in a way intended to win someone's favor

man—" the other began. But Sekhar cut him short with: "Far from it. He always struck me as a mean and selfish brute."

During the last period when he was teaching geography for Third Form A,<sup>1</sup> Sekhar received a note from the headmaster: "Please see me before you go home." Sekhar said to himself: It must be about these horrible test papers. A hundred papers in the boys' scrawls; he had shirked this work for weeks, feeling all the time as if a sword were hanging over his head.

The bell rang and the boys burst out of the class.

Sekhar paused for a moment outside the headmaster's room to button up his coat; that was another subject the headmaster always sermonized about.

He stepped in with a very polite "Good evening, sir."

The headmaster looked up at him in a very friendly manner and asked, "Are you free this evening?"

Sekhar replied, "Just some outing which I have promised the children at home—"

"Well, you can take them out another day. Come home with me now."

"Oh . . . yes, sir, certainly. . ." And then he added timidly, "Anything special, sir?"

"Yes," replied the headmaster, smiling to himself. . . "You didn't know my weakness for music?"

"Oh, yes, sir. . ."

"I've been learning and practicing secretly, and now I want you to hear me this evening. I've engaged a drummer and a violinist to accompany me—this is the first time I'm doing it full-dress and I want your opinion. I know it will be valuable."

Sekhar's taste in music was well known. He was one of the most dreaded music critics in the town. But he never anticipated his musical inclinations would lead him to this trial. . . . "Rather a surprise for you, isn't it?" asked the headmaster. "I've spent a fortune on it behind closed doors. . . ." They started for the headmaster's house. "God hasn't given me a child, but at least let him not deny me the consolation of music," the headmaster said, pathetically, as they walked. He incessantly chattered about music: how he began one day out of sheer boredom; how his teacher at first laughed at him, and then gave him hope; how his ambition in life was to forget himself in music.

At home the headmaster proved very **ingratiating**. He sat Sekhar on a red silk carpet, set before him several dishes of delicacies, and fussed over him as if he were a son-in-law of the house. He even

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1. **Third Form A** in British-style schools, an advanced class roughly equivalent to eighth grade in the United States school system.

said, “Well, you must listen with a free mind. Don’t worry about these test papers.” He added half humorously, “I will give you a week’s time.”

“Make it ten days, sir,” Sekhar pleaded.

“All right, granted,” the headmaster said generously. Sekhar felt really relieved now—he would attack them at the rate of ten a day and get rid of the nuisance.

The headmaster lighted incense sticks. “Just to create the right atmosphere,” he explained. A drummer and a violinist, already seated on a Rangoon mat, were waiting for him. The headmaster sat down between them like a professional at a concert, cleared his throat and began an alapana<sup>2</sup>, and paused to ask, “Isn’t it good Kalyani<sup>3</sup>?” Sekhar pretended not to have heard the question. The headmaster went on to sing a full song composed by Thyagaraja<sup>4</sup> and followed it with two more. All the time the headmaster was singing, Sekhar went on commenting within himself, He croaks like a dozen frogs. He is bellowing like a buffalo. Now he sounds like loose window shutters in a storm.

The incense sticks burnt low. Sekhar’s head throbbed with the medley of sounds that had assailed his eardrums for a couple of hours now. He felt half stupefied. The headmaster had gone nearly hoarse, when he paused to ask, “Shall I go on?” Sekhar replied, “Please don’t, sir; I think this will do. . . .” The headmaster looked stunned. His face was beaded with perspiration. Sekhar felt the greatest pity for him. But he felt he could not help it. No judge delivering a sentence felt more pained and helpless. Sekhar noticed that the headmaster’s wife peeped in from the kitchen, with eager curiosity. The drummer and the violinist put away their burdens with an air of relief. The headmaster removed his spectacles, mopped his brow, and asked, “Now, come out with your opinion.”

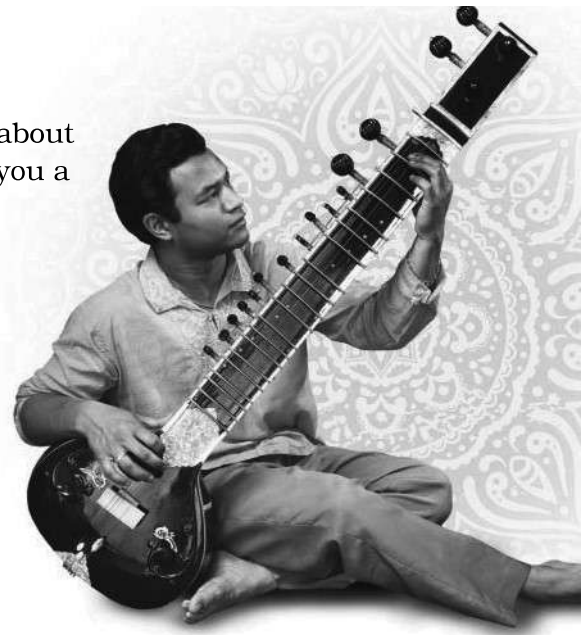
“Can’t I give it tomorrow, sir?” Sekhar asked tentatively.

“No. I want it immediately—your frank opinion. Was it good?”

“No, sir. . . .” Sekhar replied.

“Oh! . . . Is there any use continuing my lessons?”

“Absolutely none, sir. . . .” Sekhar said with his voice trembling. He felt very unhappy that he could not speak more soothingly. Truth, he reflected, required as much strength to give as to receive. All the way home he felt worried. He felt that his official life was not going to be smooth sailing hereafter. There were questions of increment



#### ▲ Critical Viewing

What can you conclude about the sitar (si tär'), a traditional Indian instrument, based on this image? Explain.

#### Comprehension

What does the headmaster request that Sekhar do that evening?

2. **alapana** (äl ä' pä nä) in classical Indian music, an improvisational exploration of a melody, without a defined beat, and intended to showcase the talent of a singer.

3. **Kalyani** (käl yä' nē) traditional Indian folk songs.

4. **Thyagaraja** (tē ä' gä rä' jä) (1767–1847) revered composer of Indian devotional songs.



### Irony and Paradox

How does Sekhar's experience contradict the idea that "honesty is the best policy"?

### Vocabulary ►

#### scrutinized

(skrōōt' 'n īzd)

v. examined carefully

and confirmation<sup>5</sup> and so on, all depending upon the headmaster's goodwill. All kinds of worries seemed to be in store for him. . . . Did not Harishchandra<sup>6</sup> lose his throne, wife, child, because he would speak nothing less than the absolute Truth whatever happened?

At home his wife served him with a sullen face. He knew she was still angry with him for his remark of the morning. Two casualties for today, Sekhar said to himself. If I practice it for a week, I don't think I shall have a single friend left.

He received a call from the headmaster in his classroom next day. He went up apprehensively.

"Your suggestion was useful. I have paid off the music master. No one would tell me the truth about my music all these days. Why such antics at my age! Thank you. By the way, what about those test papers?"

"You gave me ten days, sir, for correcting them."

"Oh, I've reconsidered it. I must positively have them here tomorrow. . . ." A hundred papers in a day! That meant all night's sitting up! "Give me a couple of days, sir. . . ."

"No. I must have them tomorrow morning. And remember, every paper must be thoroughly **scrutinized**."

"Yes, sir," Sekhar said, feeling that sitting up all night with a hundred test papers was a small price to pay for the luxury of practicing Truth.

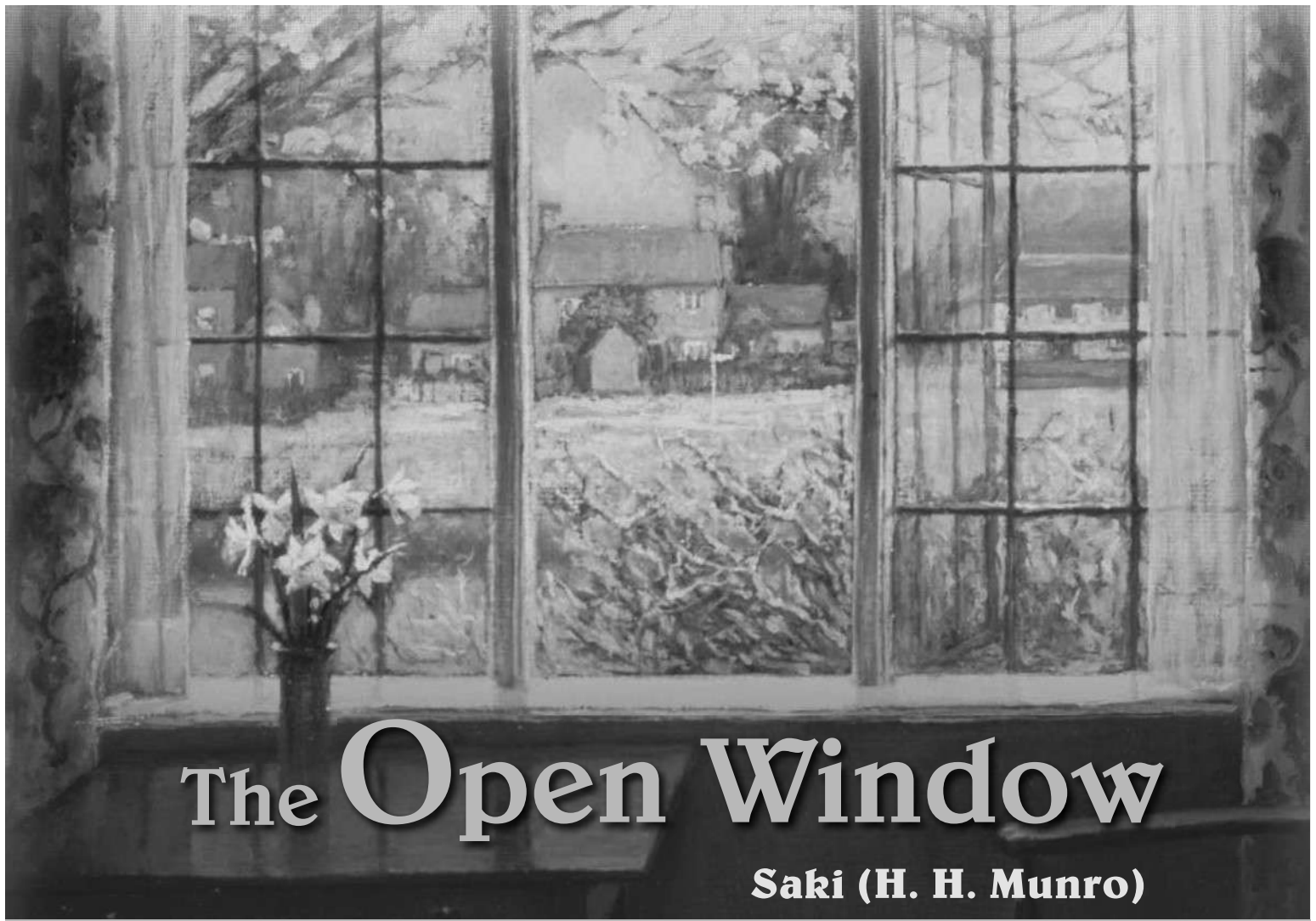
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5. **increment and confirmation** salary increase and job security.

6. **Harishchandra** (he rish chen' dra) legendary Hindu king who was the subject of many Indian stories. His name has come to symbolize truth and integrity.

## Critical Thinking

1. **Key Ideas and Details:** (a) What experiment does Sekhar plan at the beginning of the story? (b) **Connect:** What conflict does this create for him?
2. **Key Ideas and Details:** Is the headmaster pleased or angry that Sekhar has told him the truth about his music? Explain your inference.
3. **Key Ideas and Details:** (a) Are there any benefits to Sekhar's truth telling? (b) **Support:** Cite story details and logical reasons to support your conclusion.
4. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:** Based on the results of Sekhar's experiment, do you think people prefer to avoid conflicts by avoiding truth? Explain. [*Connect to the Big Question: Can progress be made without conflict?*]



# The Open Window

Saki (H. H. Munro)

“**M**y aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel,” said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen; “in the meantime you must try and put up with me.”

Framton Nuttel endeavored to say the correct something that should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come. Privately he doubted more than ever whether these formal visits on a succession of total strangers would do much towards helping the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.

“I know how it will be,” his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat; “you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of introduction<sup>1</sup> to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice.”

◀ **Vocabulary**  
**endeavored** (en dev' ərd) v. tried to achieve a set goal

1. **letters of introduction** letters introducing two strangers, written by someone who knows them both. The person to whom such a letter is written is obliged to provide hospitality to the person carrying the letter.

### Spiral Review

**THEME** Why is Vera's question, in which she seeks confirmation of Mr. Nuttel's ignorance, important?

An undefinable  
something  
about the room  
seemed to suggest  
masculine  
habitation.

### Vocabulary ►

**falteringly** (fôl' tər in lē)  
*adv.* spoken hesitatingly  
or with a wavering voice

Framton wondered whether Mrs. Sappleton, the lady to whom he was presenting one of the letters of introduction, came into the nice division.

"Do you know many of the people round here?" asked the niece, when she judged that they had had sufficient silent communion.

"Hardly a soul," said Framton. "My sister was staying here, at the rectory, you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here."

He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret.

"Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?" pursued the self-possessed young lady.

"Only her name and address," admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed state. An undefinable something about the room seemed to suggest masculine habitation.

"Her great tragedy happened just three years ago," said the child; "that would be since your sister's time."

"Her tragedy?" asked Framton; somehow in this restful country spot tragedies seemed out of place.

"You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon," said the niece, indicating a large French window that opened on to a lawn.

"It is quite warm for the time of the year," said Framton; "but has that window got anything to do with the tragedy?"

"Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favorite snipe-shooting ground<sup>2</sup> they were all three engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog.<sup>3</sup> It had been that dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly

without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it." Here the child's voice lost its self-possessed note and became **falteringly** human. "Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back some day, they and the little brown spaniel that was lost with them, and walk in at that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite

2. **snipe-shooting ground** area for hunting snipe—wading birds that live chiefly in marshy places and have long, flexible bills.

3. **bog** small swamp; wet, spongy ground.

dusk. Poor dear aunt, she has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, singing, 'Bertie, why do you bound?' as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. Do you know, sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will walk in through that window—"

She broke off with a little shudder. It was a relief to Framton when the aunt bustled into the room with a whirl of apologies for being late in making her appearance.

"I hope Vera has been amusing you?" she said.

"She has been very interesting," said Framton.

"I hope you don't mind the open window," said Mrs. Sappleton briskly; "my husband and brothers will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out for snipe in the marshes today, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. So like you menfolk, isn't it?"

She rattled on cheerfully about the shooting and the scarcity of birds, and the prospects for duck in the winter. To Framton, it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly topic; he was conscious that his hostess was giving him only a fragment of her attention, and her eyes were constantly straying past him to the open window and the lawn beyond. It was certainly an unfortunate coincidence that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary.

"The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise," announced Framton, who labored under the tolerably widespread **delusion** that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure. "On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement," he continued.

"No?" said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into alert attention—but not to what Framton was saying.

"Here they are at last!" she cried. "Just in time for tea, and don't they look as if they were muddy up to the eyes!"

Framton shivered slightly and turned towards the niece with a look intended to convey sympathetic comprehension. The child was staring out through the open window with dazed horror in her eyes. In a chill shock of nameless fear Framton swung round in his seat and looked in the same direction.

### Irony and Paradox

What kind of irony is involved when Mrs. Sappleton does not know about the tall tale Vera told Mr. Nuttel?

### ◀ Vocabulary

**delusion** (di lōō' zhan)

*n.* erroneous belief that is held despite evidence to the contrary

### Comprehension

What does Vera say is her aunt's great tragedy?



In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window; they all carried guns under their arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels. Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk: "I said, Bertie, why do you bound?"

Framton grabbed wildly at his stick and hat; the hall door, the gravel drive, and the front gate were dimly noted stages in his headlong retreat. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid imminent collision.

"Here we are, my dear," said the bearer of the white mackintosh,<sup>4</sup> coming in through the window; "fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who bolted out as we came up?"

"A most extraordinary man, a Mr. Nuttel," said Mrs. Sappleton; "could only talk about his illnesses, and dashed off without a word of goodbye or apology when you arrived. One would think he had seen a ghost."

"I expect it was the spaniel," said the niece calmly; "he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges<sup>5</sup> by a pack of pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone lose their nerve."

Romance at short notice was her specialty.

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4. **mackintosh** (mak' in täsh') *n.* waterproof raincoat.

5. **Ganges** (gan' jēz) river in northern India and Bangladesh.

## Critical Thinking

- 1. Key Ideas and Details:** (a) Why is Mr. Nuttel visiting the country? (b) **Interpret:** Why is this detail critical to the story?
- 2. Key Ideas and Details:** (a) Why does Vera tell Mr. Nuttel the story about the hunters' deaths? (b) **Connect:** Is it unusual for her to tell such stories? Explain.
- 3. Key Ideas and Details:** How are Mr. Nuttel and Vera similar and how are they different? Use details from the story to support your answer.
- 4. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:** (a) What motivates Vera to create conflict where none exists? (b) Do you think she is satisfied by the results? (c) Does Vera's behavior prevent progress, or does it somehow promote it? Explain, citing details from the story to support your response. [*Connect to the Big Question: Can progress be made without conflict?*]