

5. Boy Scouts Forever

_ Ruskin Bond

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Ruskin Bond (1934-) is an Indian author of British descent. He is a prolific writer who has written many stories, novels, essays, and lots of books for children. Some of his best-known books are *The Blue Umbrella* and *Delhi is Not Far*.

I was a Boy Scout once, although I couldn't tell a slip knot from a granny knot, or a reef knot from a thief knot, except that a thief knot was supposed to tie up a thief, should you happen to catch one. I have never caught a thief and wouldn't know what to do with one since I can't tie a knot. Just let him go with a warning, I suppose. Tell him to become a Boy Scout.

'Be prepared' That's the Boy Scout motto. And a good one, too. But I never seem to be well prepared for anything, be it an exam or a journey or the roof blowing off my room. I get halfway through a speech and then forget what I have to say next. Or I make a new suit to attend a friend's wedding, and then turn up in my pajamas.



So how did I, the most impractical of boys, become a Boy Scout? I was at boarding school in Shimla when it happened.

Well, it seems a rumor had gone around the junior school (I was still a junior then) that I was a good cook. I had never cooked anything in my life, but of course, I had spent a lot of time in the tuck shop making suggestions and advising Chippu, who ran the tuck shop, and encouraging him to make more and better samosas, jalebis, and pakoras. For my unwanted advice, he would favor me with an occasional free samosa, so naturally, I looked upon him as a friend and benefactor. With this qualification, I was given a cookery badge and put in charge of our troop's supply of rations.



There were about twenty us in our troop and the summer breaks our Scoutmaster, Mr Oliver, took us on a camping expedition to Tara Devi, a temple-crowned mountain a few miles outside Shimla. That first night we were put to work, peeling potatoes, skinning onions, shelling peas and pounding masalas. These various ingredients being ready, I was asked-as the troop's cookery expert-what should be done with them.

Put everything in that big degchi I ordered. 'Pour half a tin of ghee over the lot. And some nettle leaves and cook for half an hour

When this was done, everyone had a taste, but the general opinion was that the dish lacked something.

'More salt, I suggested.

More salt was added. It still lacked something.

'Add a cup of sugar', I ordered.



Sugar was added to the concoction. But still it lacked something.

We forgot to add tomatoes, said Bimal, one of the Scouts.

'Never mind, I said. 'We have tomato sauce. Add a bottle of tomato sauce!'

How about some vinegar? Asked another boy.

Just the thing, I said. 'A cup of vinegar!

Now it's too sour, said one of the tasters.

What jam did we bring?" I asked.

Gooseberry jam.

'Just the thing. Empty the bottle

The dish was a great success. Everyone had enjoyed it, including Mr Oliver, who no idea what went into it.

What's this called?' he asked.

It's an all-Indian sweet-and-sour jam-potato curry, I ventured.

'For short, just call it Bond-bhuji, said Bimal.

I had earned my cookery badge!

Poor Mr Oliver! He wasn't really cut out to be a Scoutmaster, any more than I was meant to be a Scout. The following day he announced that he would give us a lesson in tracking. He would take a half-hour start and walk into the forest, leaving behind him a trail of broken twigs, chicken feathers, pine cones and chestnuts, and we were to follow the trail until we found him.



Unfortunately, we were not very good trackers. We did follow Mr Oliver's trail some way into the forest but were distracted by a pool of clear water which looked very inviting. Abandoning our uniforms, we jumped into the pool and had a great time romping around or just lying on the grassy banks and enjoying the sunshine. A couple of hours later feeling hungry, we returned to our campsite and set about preparing the evening meal. Bond-bhuji again, but with further variations.

It was growing dark and we were beginning to worry about Mr Oliver's whereabouts when he limped into camp, assisted by a couple of local villagers. Having waited for us at the far end of the forest for a couple of hours, he had decided to return by following his own trail, but in the gathering gloom he was soon lost. Some locals returning from the temple took charge of him and escorted him back to camp. He was very angry and made us return all our good-conduct and other badges, which he stuffed into his haversack". I had to give up my cookery badge too.



An hour later, when we were all preparing to get into our sleeping bags for the night, Mr Oliver called out, 'Where's dinner?

We've had ours, said Bimal. "Everything is finished, Sir.

Where's Bond? He's supposed to be the cook. Bond, get up and make me an omelette.

Can't, Sir

Why not?

You have my badge. Not allowed to cook without it. Scout rule, Sir' Never heard of such a rule. But you can have your badges, all of you. We return to school tomorrow



Mr Oliver returned to his tent in a huff. But I relented and made him a great omelet, garnishing it with dandelion leaves and an extra chilly.

Never had such an omelet before, confessed Mr Oliver, blowing out his cheeks. 'A little too hot, but otherwise quite interesting'

Would you like another, Sir?

Tomorrow, Bond, tomorrow. We'll breakfast early tomorrow.

But we had to break up camp very early the next day. In the early hours a bear had strayed into our camp, entered the tent where our stores were kept and created havoc with all our provisions, even rolling our biggest degchi down the hillside.

In the confusion and uproar that followed, the bear entered

Mr Oliver's tent (he was already outside, fortunately) and came out entangled in Mr Oliver's dressing gown. It then made off in the direction of the forest.



A bear in a dressing gown? It was a comical sight. And though we were a troop of brave Scouts, we thought it better to let the bear keep the gown.

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