

2

Zigzag

Asha Nehemiah

Supplementary

The family that shelters a new pet is totally taken up by the commotions it creates at home. Read on the story to find out there is a turn of events when they get to know the reality



Dr. Ashok T. Krishnan's clinic usually sounded more like an ancient Chinese torture chamber than a child specialist's clinic. This was because the tiny children who were his patients left out a variety of blood-curdling yells and ear-splitting sobs.

'It's all because my patients were making so much noise and crying so loudly, ' he apologized to his wife one evening, 'that Somu couldn't hear me properly. He rang me in the clinic to ask whether we could keep Zigzag with us when he leaves for Alaska. And now Somu thinks I said "yes", even though I clearly said "no" ! I know you are busy getting your painting ready for your exhibition next w...'

'Zigzag!' interrupted their nine-year-old daughter Maya.

'Isn't that Uncle Somu's prized giant green-and-gold fighting beetle, the one that spits deadly poison straight into its opponent's eye?'

'No , no,' corrected her older brother Arvind, eyes shining in pure delight. 'The beetle is called Spitfire. Zigzag must

be Uncle Somu's pet snake. The African sidewinder! You know, the one that slithers Zigzag all over his house!'

'You're both quite mistaken,' their father hastened to explain, seeing his wife's horrified expression. 'Zigzag is a most harmless, unusual and lovable bird. Apparently, it was bred by a genuine African witch doctor, who gifted it to Somu when he-----being a child specialist like me -----cured the witch doctor's son while he was touring the deepest jungles of equatorial Africa last month. Somu says the bird is an absolute treasure and a real help. It's his favourite pet, you know.'

Somu might be your best friend, but most of these so called "favourite" possessions that he has given us were absolute nuisances!' countered Mrs. Krishnan angrily. A talented artist, she applied a dab of yellow-ochre paint onto her painting titled Sunset at Marina, paused for a moment to survey the effect and then continued, 'Remember the rare insect-eating plant he brought back from the wettest corner of the Amazonian rainforest! He insisted that we keep it because it would eat the mosquitoes in the house and now that wretched plant requires a room heater to keep it alive in Chennai!'

'Ma!' protested Arvind, 'That's not really true. Uncle Somu's given us some really fabulous gifts.'

‘Right! Remember the tiny penknife he gave me last year, the one with a genuine shark’s tooth blade. That’s been really useful,’ Maya joined the protest.

‘No one but you, Maya,’ Mrs. Krishnan told her daughter sternly, ‘would describe a penknife that has cut open the pockets of three skirts and two pairs of jeans as *really useful*.’

‘And what about the **aboriginal** boomerang Uncle Somu brought us all the way from Australia?’ demanded Arvind. ‘You can’t deny that it was a great hit with everyone.’

‘Great hit indeed!’ Mrs. Krishnan didn’t bother to hide her **sarcasm** and continued, ‘Considering that the boomerang sliced through all the TV aerials in the neighbourhood, caused permanent damage to several cars in the parking lot, and knocked out our watchman cold, with the force you threw it.’

‘But Zigzag is different. Somu says we are sure to love Zigzag,’ soothed Dr. Krishnan, ‘because the bird can talk and sing in about twenty-one different languages - mostly African languages, of course. When it sings, it moves the listeners to tears.’

‘It’s Somu’s thoughtless ways that reduce me to tears!’ Mrs. Krishnan said irritably. ‘What a time to dump this multilingual, talking-singing bird on us. Here I’m tied up in knots trying to get my paintings together for the exhibition next week.’

‘May I take Zigzag to school, Papa?’ Arvind, as always, was planning ahead. ‘I want to display him in the science exhibition.’

‘When is Zigzag coming, Papa?’ Maya was jumping up and down, all excited.

‘Uncle Somu said he would send Zigzag with his old cook, Visu, sometime today. I’ll have to leave for my clinic now. There,’ he added as the doorbell rang, ‘that’s probably them!’

And indeed it was!

‘Come in, Zigzag, come in, dear!’ coaxed Visu, and in tottered the strangest, weirdest-looking bird the Krishnan family had ever seen.

About a foot and a half tall, its bald head was **fringed** with a crown of shocking pink feathers while the rest of its **plumage** was in various shades of the muddiest **sludgiest** brown. Its curved beak was sunflower-yellow and its eyes were the colour of cola held to sunlight.

‘This is Zigzag! Announced Visu with a flourish. ‘His full name is Ziggy-Zagga-king-of-the-Tonga. How I’m going to miss him! So beautifully he talks! He can even recite French Poetry!’

The object of all this praise was standing cool and unmoved, with an expression of almost-human **grumpiness** in his cola-coloured eyes.

Arvind, finding that Zigzag was sulkily refusing to say a word despite all

their efforts at striking a conversation, dashed into the kitchen to return with a plate heaped hurriedly with juicy fruit slices and some nuts.

Bored eyes brightened momentarily as Zigzag picked up a walnut. But refusing to speak, he dropped one wrinkled eyelid in a solemn wink and flew clumsily to deposit the nut on the enormous chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Bit by bit, and in total silence, all the fruit on the plate was transferred to the chandelier and on to the blades of the ceiling fan (now switched off).

Then perching comfortably on a curtain rod, Zigzag dropped one wizened eyelid in another solemn wink as he sank his beak into a plump guava.

‘Don’t worry, children,’ Visu comforted as he left, noticing how disappointed they looked when Zigzag stubbornly refused to say a single word to them even though they tried speaking to him in English, Hindi, Tamil and French. ‘Just wait till Zigzag settles down in this new home, they you can have a great time listening to him.’

As it happened, the children didn’t have to wait more than ten minutes to have a great time listening to Zigzag. For as soon as Visu left, Zigzag, still perched on the curtain rod, went off to sleep. And the moment he fell asleep, he began to SNORE!

And what a snore it was Kngrrwheeze!!! It began as a soft grumbly sort of rumble, much like that

which the stomach of a mildly hungry dinosaur might have made. Then it grew louder, and louder, and LOUDER until it sounded as if a herd of elephants with cold was trumpeting angrily in the room. KNGRRDRRWHEEZE!!!

Zigzag’s snore pounded their eardrums till their heads ached.

In vain did they try to wake the snoring bird. ‘Twenty-one languages, he’s supposed to know!’ snorted Mrs.Krishnan. ‘Yet this bird chooses to communicate only in snorish, snorese, snorian, snorihili, snoralu...’

‘I thought it was scientific fact that birds couldn’t snore,’ said Maya, trying to squirt water from a small water pistol at Zigzag to wake him and wetting most of the curtains, the walls and a sofa instead.

‘African witch doctor’s birds don’t obey scientific rules.’ Arvind was annoyed that his best imitations of a raging lion, a hungry hyena and a ferocious dog had failed to draw Zigzag out of his deep slumber. Now he tried his loudest, most frightening coyote call.

But Zigzag slept on undisturbed. And snored on.

In total despair at their failure to wake Zigzag, or at least stop him snoring, they shut themselves in the bedroom that was furthest away from Mrs.Krishnan’s studio where Zigzag was creating the terrible din. Mrs.Krishnan was just unraveling a roll of cotton wool to stuff in her ears, when they heard their maid,

Lakshmi, shrieking as if she had been electrocuted.



Hearts hammering, they rushed to the studio to find Lakshmi dancing and clapping her hands excitedly as she yelled, ‘We’ ve been blessed! We’ve been truly blessed! It’s raining papayas and bananas in this room!’

They froze in horror. Lakshmi had apparently switched on the fan on which Zigzag had left some fruit and nuts. Half-pecked fruit streamed off the fan, dampening even Lakshmi’s enthusiasm as a guava landed on her cheek with a soft squish and one walnut hit her forehead with a loud smack. One slice of over-ripe papaya came whizzing off the fan and, as they watched it helplessly, it oh horrors splattered all over Mrs.Krishnan’s unfinished masterpiece, sunset at Marina, spreading streaks of gooey orange pulp and shiny black seeds all over it.

Mrs.Krishnan groaned tragically and looked ready to shoot Zigzag, but he was saved by the bell. The telephone bell! They answered one call after another as all the neighbours rang upto demand what the awful KNGRRDRRWHEEZE sound was

and if they could please have some peace.

And through all this commotion, Zigzag slept on unconcerned. And snored on.

Finally, an exhausted Mrs.Krishnan rang up her husband. I’am going crazy with the sound of Zigzag snoring, plus all these angry telephone calls. And my beautiful painting...’ Here her voice cracked. ‘You know Mrs.Jhunjhunwala, the art critic who lives upstairs, well, she heard Zigzag snoring and had the cheek to telephone and ask me whether I could sing a little softly when I took my singing lessons. Please contact Somu and find out what we should do.’

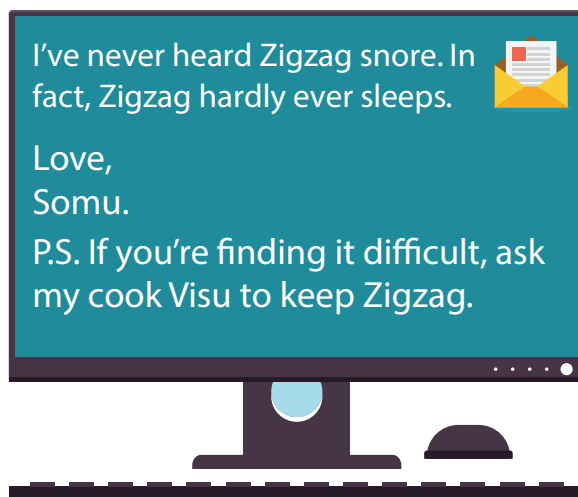
Dr.Krishnan came home as fast as he could after he had left an e-mail message for Somu, asking him for clear instructions on how to stop Zigzag from snoring.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he reassured his downcast family. ‘Somu will reply soon and we’ll discover there’s some ridiculously simple way to stop Zigzag from snoring.

Six days passed. Six frantic days of checking their e-mail day and night. Six torturous days of having the deafeningly loud KNGRRDRRWHEEZE resound in their home, most nerve wrackingly. Maya complained that she heard a permanent rumbling sound in her ears even when she was miles away from home and that her ears ached all the time. Arvind confessed that, for the first time in his life, he was actually looking forward to going to school considering it was as calm as a monastery compared to their house. Mrs. Krishnan had lost interest in painting.

Zigzag would sometimes wake up briefly when he wanted to eat some fruit, and sometimes he would sit on the veranda looking sulky and bored as he stared at the Sunset at Marina beach- the real view, not the painting lying forlorn in one corner, ruined by **streaks** of hardening papaya. Zigzag never spoke to anyone, though everyone tried several times, and in several languages, to speak to him kindly. He only slept. And snored.

On the seventh day, Dr.Somu's e-mail arrived. It was, as Dr.Krishnan predicted, ridiculously simple. It read:



'That does it,' said Mrs.Krishnan. 'Find Visu! I will not keep Zigzag here another minute!'

'Calm down, dear, I'm leaving for my clinic now. Can't it wait till...'

'No, it's now!' Mrs.Krishnan was adamant. 'I've invited some friends and are experts to come home and choose my paintings for the exhibition. This feathered, snoring monster will drive us all mad!'

'Come on then, Zigzag,' called Dr.Krishnan nervously, wondering how he would locate Somu's cook, Visu.

'Er, why don't you wait in the car, Zigzag?' he suggested. When they reached his clinic, his heart sinking at the thought of Zigzag's ear-shatteringly loud snore adding to the din of the sobs and shrieks produced by the tiny patients waiting for him.

But Ziggy-Zagga-King-of-the-Tonga was not accustomed to being kept waiting and was already making his way to the clinic where he perched himself on the nurse's reception table.

'Don't you dare sleep!' Dr.Krishnan warned Zigzag fiercely as he went towards his room.

He had hardly walked through the swinging half-door that separated his clinic from the waiting room when he heard a strange voice say, 'You there in the blue T-shirt, don't jump on the sofa. And you in the red dress, don't swing on the curtain.'

It was Zigzag's voice, clear and commanding. There was pin-drop silence in the room as everyone waited, open-mouthed, for Zigzag's next sentence.

Dr.Krishnan was amazed! Gone was Zigzag's bored and grumpy expression. Instead the bird looked happy and alert as it went about the job it had been trained for, first with the African witch doctor and then with Dr.Somu. Dr.Krishnan's clinic, usually a noisy sea of tears and **tantrums**, was transformed into a calm, orderly

place as Zigzag efficiently soothed the frightened patients, scolded the naughty ones and made the crying ones smile. And if his yam-digging song and recitation of French poetry reduced the children to helpless laughter instead of tears, he didn't look as though he minded. And best of all, Zigzag never slept. Or snored. Even for a second!

Never had a morning passed so quietly and peacefully for Dr.Krishnan. When the last patient had left, he called Zigzag to his room. Zigzag flew in and sat on the table. Scratching the bird under its beak, Dr.Krishnan sighed and said, 'Somu was right, after all. You are an absolute treasure. I never realized what he meant when he called you *a great help*. Why didn't you tell me you'd prefer to be at my clinic instead of snoring like that to show you were bored? What do we do now? No one wants you back at home now; they want me to leave you with Visu.'

Just then the telephone rang. It was Mrs. Krishnan, sounding very pleased with herself. 'You know Mrs.Jhunjhunwala, the art critic?' she chuckled. 'She doesn't want me to exhibit *Sunset at Marina*. She's bought it for herself, for ₹ 5,000!'

Isn't that the painting the papaya fell on

'Yes.' Mrs.Krishnan was laughing heartily now. I had left it in one corner and she chose to buy it, saying she loved my new technique of painting! She simply adored those streaky orangey bits! She launched into fresh gales of laughter. 'By the way,' she said when she sobered down, 'I don't think we were fair to Zigzag. Shall

we keep him with us at home, just on trial for another week?'

'Sure!,' agreed a delighted Dr.Krishnan before he cleverly added. 'And I could always take him to the clinic every morning so that you can paint in peace at home.'

'My boy!' he confided to Zigzag after matters were satisfactorily settled, giving the bird a toffee from his desk. 'You have your own strange way of showing your genius. A Zigzag way, I'd call it, wouldn't you?'

But Ziggy - Zagga - King - of - the -Tonga, brought up on compliments as he was, didn't bother to reply. He just ate the toffee, paper wrapper and all, and then lowered one **crinkly** eyelid in a knowing wink.

About the author



Asha Nehemiah born in 1958 at Chennai has lived, studied and worked in 8 different cities and small towns and is now a resident of Bangalore. She has always been interested in writing. Her love for reading, led her to study Literature in college. If she had not been a writer, she would have been a teacher. Humour, fantasy, mystery and adventure are the strong elements in her work. She loves baking, walking, reading and travelling.



Glossary

aboriginal (adj.) - native, local

sarcasm (n) - use of irony to mock or convey contempt

fringed (v) - bordered

plumage (n) - a bird's feather collectively

sludgiest (adj.) - wet mud

grumpiness (adj.) - bad tempered

squirt (n) - spray

coyote (n) - a wolf like wild dog native to North America.

streaks (n) - line, strap.

tantrum (n) - outburst, flare-up.

crinkly (adj.) - wrinkly.

A. Identify the speaker / character.

1. Even though I clearly said no!
2. The one that spits deadly poison straight into its opponent's eyes.
3. Remember the tiny penknife he gave me last year.
4. It's Somu's thoughtless ways that reduce me to tears.
5. Come in, Zigzag, come in dear!

B. Read the story again and write how these characters reacted in these situations:

1. You're both quite mistaken.
Dr. Krishnan
Mrs. Krishnan.....
2. It's Somu's thoughtless ways that reduce me to tears.
Mrs. Krishnan
Dr. Krishnan

3. Just wait till Zigzag settles down in this new home.
Visu.....
Arvind and Maya.....
4. Zigzag hardly ever sleeps.
Somu.....
Dr. Krishnan.....
5. You are an absolute treasure.....
Dr. Krishnan.....
Zigzag.....



C. Complete the given tabular column.

Arrival of Zigzag	Somu requested Dr. Krishnan to take care of his pet.	Mrs.Krishnan was not.....	She was worried about her
Life of Zigzag at Dr. Krishnan's residence	Zigzag perched on the curtain rod and	When their maid switched on the fan.....	Mrs. Krishnan was annoyed and called Mr. Krishnan to.....
The email about Zigzag	Dr. Krishnan	Somu's reply surprised the Krishnans.	The reply was.....
Zigzag at the clinic	When Zigzag entered the clinic he.....	Gone was Zigzag's bored and grumpy expression. The bird looked happy and alert.	After the family knew that zigzag must be kept busy they.....

D. Answer the following questions in one or two sentences:

1. Why did Dr. Ashok's cousin call him ?
2. Mention at least two expressions which show that Mrs. Krishnan was not willing to have Zigzag at home.
3. What pets did Somu have?
4. What was Mrs.Krishnan busy with?
5. What commotion did the boomerang cause in the neighborhood?
6. What happened when Somu left Zigzag with the Krishnans?
7. How did Zigzag communicate with the Krishnans?
8. What was the e-mail message sent to Somu by Dr. Krishnan?
9. What did Arvind confess?
10. Why did Mrs. Jhunjhunwala buy the painting?

E. Answer the following questions in about 100 - 150 words:

1. Write a passage in your own words on various commotions caused by Zigzag at Dr. Krishnan's residence.
2. What happened when Zigzag was taken to the clinic.
3. Narrate the story of Zigzag in your own words.