

WHO IS OLDER?

Abbe and Apan were sitting together under the big tree in the yard eating biscuits.

"Apan, who is older, you or I?"

"I'm older than you are."

"Hmm! Why?"

"I am seven years old and you are five. Of course, I'm older than you are."

"I know seven years old is older than five years old, but are you really older than me?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm saying are you really seven years old?"

"Of course, I'm seven years old. Don't forget I'm a first grader now."

"Na! Are you all over seven years old?"

"What do you mean all over seven years old? Seven years old is seven years old. You just don't say all over seven years old."

"I'm asking you if your whole body is seven years old?"

"Yes, of course my whole body is seven years old."

"But you just clipped your finger nails yesterday. I saw you."

"So what?"

"So I bet your newly grown fingernails are not yet seven years old. Maybe they are even younger than our little brother, Ada's nails."

Apan crooks his neck, bends his head, thinks for a while and says, "But I'm seven years old."

"But your whole body is not seven years old."

"Are you saying that some of me is seven years old, and some of me is not yet seven years old."

"Hmmm."

"Then, I'm not necessarily older than you are?"

"That's right. For example, some of your teeth have fallen out, and new ones haven't grown in yet. And some of the new ones have just come in. And my teeth--all my teeth have been around for a long, long time."

"You mean some of your teeth are older than some of my teeth?"

"Hmm! Hmm!"

"And think of your hair. Sometimes my hair is older than yours and sometimes your hair is older than mine."

"Older brother, Apan, you are very smart."

"Hmmm."

"And think of little Ada. Then think of the three of us. Now, who do you think is the real older brother?"

"It depends. Sometimes I am, and I guess sometimes you are and maybe sometimes even Ada is."

"Ada??"

"Ada's hair hasn't been cut since he was born."

"All right! From now on, don't call me your older brother and I won't call you my younger brother. You can just call me 'Apan' and I will just call you 'Abbe.'"

"Okay."

"Do you know why? Because seven years old is not necessarily older than five years old."

Just then, Momma comes in from the yard, walking very slowly with a large bamboo basket of newly washed clothes. "Apan and Abbe, go get your little brother and take him out in the sunshine."

"Which little brother?" Abbe asks.

"You only have one little brother," Momma says.

Apan gives Abbe a long look and says, "Momma, you often say that when you speak you ought to speak clearly and distinctly. Which little brother do you mean?"

"What happened to you two? When I say your little brother, I mean, of course, Apan's little brother and also Abbe's little brother. Is that clear? His name is Ada."

Momma's voice is getting louder and louder.

"Oh, if you had said 'Ada' to start with, wouldn't that have been better? I mean, instead of saying 'little brother'?"

Cheu Huey-Ing