Sisiphus

(The story of a beetle and a King.)

In English we call them **Dung Beetles**.

The Latin name for the Dung Beetle family, though, is ***Sisiphus***.

Why is that?



Tutor: I love biology. Just love it.

*Student: Biology?*

Yes. You know.

*Not really. What’s biology?*

The study of living things.

*The study of living things?*

The study of the natural world.

*Oh. OK.*

I think it’s fascinating.

*Well yes. It is.*

The other day I read about an insect, for example.

*Really? Which insect?*

The dung beetle.

*The dung beetle?*

Yes. I’m really into them now.

*Why? What’s so cool about dung beetles?*

Well, where should I start?

*Start at the beginning.*

How do you mean?

*The beginning. Start there.*

The beginning?

*That’s always a good place to start.*

Are you taking the Mick?

*Oh no. Of course not.*

Hmmmmm…

*No, really.*

Well …

*Start from the beginning, and tell me about the dung beetle.*

OK then. Let’s start with the name.

*The dung beetle?*

Well, that’s its common name.

*Its common name? How do you mean?*

In English. Its name in English.

*Oh, right.*

Its common name in English is “dung beetle”.

*But all living things have a Latin name as well, right?*

Two, in fact.

*Two names?*

A family name and a species name.

*Like we do.*

Yes. Like we do.

*Our Latin family name is Homo.*

That’s right. It means man.

*We belong to the family of Homo.*

Right.

*The family of man.*

And Sisiphus is the family name for dung beetles.

*In Latin. That’s the Latin family name.*

Yes. The scientific name.

*Are there different kinds of dung beetle?*

Loads. But they’re all in the same family.

*So they all have the same family name?*

Yes. Sispihus.

*We have a Latin family name too.*

Yes. It’s Homo. Latin for man.

*Yes.*

We’re the family of man.

*I know. You just said that.*

Oh. So I did.

*The full scientific name for us is “Homo sapiens”.*

Yes.

*And it means “the man who thinks”.*

“Homo” means “man” and “sapiens” means “thinking”, I suppose?

*Yes. In Latin.*

Our scientific name is often written as H. sapiens.

*H. stands for Homo. Our family name.*

Yes. I know.

*But sapiens is the name of our species.*

So our full scientific name is H. sapiens.

*Homo sapiens.*

The man who thinks.

*We both know all that. Let’s get back to the dung beetle.*

Mmmm...?

*Well, you haven’t told me anything about it yet.*

Oh. No. I suppose not.

*So? What about the dung beetle?*

Well, the dung beetle’s family name is Sisiphus.

*I know that. But why are dung beetles called Sisiphus?*

It comes from an ancient Greek myth.

*What’s it about?*

Well, it’s about a Greek King from thousands of years ago.

*A Greek King from thousands of years ago?*

Yes. His name was King Sisiphus.

*OK. Tell me about this King.*

Well, dung beetles take their family name from King Sisiphus.

*Why?*

It’s a long story.

*Yes?*

Quite a long story, anyway.

*Yes?*

It’s a long story, but quite an interesting one.

*Yes?*

A very interesting story, in fact.

*Yes?*

In spite of being so long.

*Really?*

I think so, anyway.

*OK*.

And it’s not even all that long.

*No?*

No. It’s not really long at all.

*Right.*

Shall I tell you it?

*What? Yes! Get on with it! Before my head explodes!*

Well, Sisiphus was a King thousands of years ago.

*A Greek King. I know.*

Really?

*You just told me. Sisiphus was a Greek king, thousands of years ago. You just said.*

Oh. So I did.

*And?*

Well, he was a bit naughty.

*How do you mean “he was a bit naughty”?*

Well, it’s only a myth of course.

*I know that.*

Just a story.

*Yes. I know it’s only a story. I know what a myth is! But what happened?*

Well, you know Hades was King of the underworld?

*Hang on. What was the underworld?*

The kingdom of the dead.

*The kingdom of the dead? How do you mean?*

It’s where you went when you were dead.

*Where you went when you were dead?*

It’s where the souls of the dead lived.

*Well, that’s what they thought, I guess.*

Yes.

*In ancient Greece. That’s what they thought in ancient Greece.*

Yes.

*Right. And Hades was King of the underworld?*

Yes

*OK. But what does this have to do with dung beetles?*

Well, Sisiphus got talking to Hades one day.

*He got talking to Hades? That’s scary!*

And Sisiphus played a trick on Hades.

*Played a trick on the King of the dead?*

Yes.

*That wasn’t very clever!*

No. Not at all clever.

*So what was the trick he played?*

Well, Hades had some golden handcuffs.

*Handcuffs for the dead?*

To get them into the underworld, I suppose.

*Right. What then?*

He got Hades to show them to him.

*He’s a bit silly, this King!*

Silly?

*Well, you can see what’s going to happen next.*

Can you?

*He gets Hades to put them on, doesn’t he?*

Well, yes. That’s right! He gets Hades to put his own handcuffs on.

*Which probably made him cross.*

Hades? Yes, I expect so.

*Very cross indeed, I expect.*

Yes. It did.

*Not very clever!*

No. You should never annoy the king of the underworld. Remember that.

*And now he can’t take the dead down to the underworld.*

No. He’s handcuffed.

*He’s in his own handcuffs!*

That’s exactly right. he was stuck. Nobody could die.

*Awesome!*

Well, it got to be a real problem.

*Really?*

So the story says, anyway. The dead queuing up to go into the underworld.

*So I suppose the King had to let Hades go, in the end?*

Yes.

*I bet Hades was cross.*

You bet he was!

*I bet he remembered Sisiphus, too.*

He did.

*He probably wanted to pay him back.*

Yes. He did.

*And even a King has to die, one day.*

Yes. And one day, of course, he did.

*And Hades was waiting for him.*

You’re right. He was!

*Oops!*

Exactly! Oops!

*What did Hades do to him?*

To Sisiphus?

*Yes.*

He had a special punishment for him.

*What was that?*

He made him roll a rock up to the top of a hill.

*That wasn’t so bad.*

It was, actually.

*Why?*

Because Sisiphus never gets the rock to the top of the hill.

*Never gets it to the top of the hill?*

No. Not quite.

*How’s that?*

He has to do it over and over again.

*For ever and ever?*

Yes.

*Why?*

Because every time he gets it near the top, it slips.

*And rolls back down?*

Right.

*And he has to start all over again?*

Yes.

*So he has to roll a rock up a hill for ever and ever?*

That’s right.

*Poor King.*

Yes, poor Sisiphus.

*Where does the dung beetle come in, then?*

Oh yes.

*The dung beetle named Sisiphus.*

Yes. After a Greek King.

*Yes, but why is the dung beetle named Sisiphus? You still haven’t told me.*

Well, a dung beetle lays one egg at a time.

*Right.*

And it immediately wraps it up.

*Does it?*

In a lump of dung.

*Really? Wraps it up in a lump of dung?*

Yes.

*Why would it do that?*

To hide it I suppose.

*Oh.*

And maybe provide food for the egg.

*For when it hatches?*

Yes.

*How does the beetle wrap its egg in a lump of dung?*

Well that’s the whole point of the story, you see.

*That’s where Sisiphus comes in, is it?*

Yes.

*How?*

Because the beetle rolls a little bit of dung round and round and round.

*Until it is a little ball, I suppose.*

Yes. A little ball of dung.

*With an egg hidden in the middle, I guess.*

Yes.

*And this makes people think of Sisiphus?*

Yes. They think of King Sisiphus rolling his rock up the hill.

*The beetle rolls its lump of dung round and round and round.*

Working really hard.

*And it looks like King Sisiphus rolling his rock.*

Working really hard.

*And I suppose dung beetles lay loads of eggs?*

Yes. They do. Loads of eggs.

*And they hide every egg in a ball of dung.*

Yes.

*So dung beetles spend a lot of time rolling balls of dung around.*

Yes. They do.

*Right.*

In some parts of the world it’s very common.

*To see dung beetles rolling balls of dung?*

Yes.

*They must seem to spend all their time rolling dung balls.*

Exactly.

*They must seem to roll dung balls for ever and ever.*

Yes. Just like Sisiphus.

*Rolling his rock.*

Which is why the family name for dung beetles is Sisiphus.

*Rolling his rock for ever and ever.*

Yes.

*Like a dung beetle rolling a dung ball.*

Yes. Exactly like that!

(In memory of Duggie Lees who taught biology all those years ago. His light still shines bright and clear.)