What are human rights?
Your name is Maria. You are a journalist. You wrote a news story which made the President very angry. The next day the police broke into your home and you were taken away. You were beaten and put in a room alone. No one knows where you are. You have been there for six months.
Your name is Sha Shanti. You are 10 years old. Your legs are crippled because when you were very young you had polio. You have to work in a factory the whole day and you are tired all the time. You have never been to school.
Your name is Ben.

Your parents have sent you to buy some groceries at the new store that has just opened around the corner. The manager — a little man with a ginger moustache — sees you coming in and shouts at you. He says he does not serve people like you. 'Get out', he yells. You leave very upset. You do not know what you have done wrong. Your skin is brown.
There is something each of these different people don't have. They don't have their _human rights._
What are human rights? The general answer has three aspects: a moral one, a legal one and a practical one.
there is something about us that always seems the same

Now think for a moment about what you are. There are many answers you might give, but an obvious one might be: 'I am a human being'. There are many different kinds of human being. As well as these differences, however, there is something about us all that is the same.
Most people agree there are some things it is right to give others (or do for them) because they are human beings. Because of our sameness, this is so for everyone. Whatever colour, shape or sex we happen to be does not matter. Nor does it matter if we have a good memory or not, or prefer sport to reading. Everybody everywhere deserves to have or get their rights.
Thinking or feeling about the rightness and wrongness of the things we do is called *morality*. To say there are 'human rights', then, is to say first of all there are *moral* rights. It is to say that there are things it seems wrong to do to anybody, ever.

Sometimes these thoughts and feelings about right and wrong are made into *laws*. When this happens, human rights become *legal* rights. Politicians or judges make a decision that becomes a law. Or statesmen make an agreement that a number of governments promise to obey.

But laws are not always obeyed. Governments do not always do what they say they will. So, as well as looking at human rights as *moral* feelings, and as *laws*, we have to look at whether or not people actually get their rights. In those countries where rights have been made into laws, we need to find out if they are being put into *practice*. We should ask what the *practical* reality happens to be.
This is all very general, so far. What about human rights *in particular*? What does a human being deserve just because he or she is a human being — like yourself? What would you actually put in a *list* of human rights, if you were asked to make one up for yourself?
You may not know how it feels not to have enough food. You may not know what it is like not to have somewhere to live.

You may never have been in a country where people cannot vote for the government of their choice, and cannot say what they like about politics without being put in prison. But you can still imagine these things.
Everybody needs to eat, and have a home. Everybody deserves a chance to be educated, to have work to do and to have a family. Everybody should be able to move about, to be different and to say most of what he or she likes, without fear.
Without such things, no one is likely to lead a very full or happy life.
It is needs and wants and characteristics like these that help us to work out lists of human rights. They help us to decide what our particular human rights happen to be.

Forty years ago, at the end of World War II, the countries that had won that huge war were wondering how to arrange world affairs. They met together and decided to start a United Nations. Because of the war and all the suffering and destruction, many people wanted to build a better world, which is why one of the first things the United Nations did was to make a list of human rights and to write them down for all people to read and to use.

This was called the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It had thirty different Articles in it. It set out the basic rights for everyone in the world, whatever their colour, sex, language or religion, and whatever country they came from (indeed, one of the Articles said that everyone be allowed to have a country to come from).

'Universal' means 'something belonging to everybody in the world'.
A 'declaration' is a formal written announcement.
An 'article' is a part of a declaration.
In writing down this Universal Declaration, the United Nations was saying: whether governments make these rights into laws or not, they are important anyway. Everybody everywhere ought to know about them and ought to have or get them.

Not all countries have made all of them into laws. But the idea of human rights has been very important in world affairs ever since.
The story did not stop there, however. The United Nations has made more lists since. One of these is called:
A 'covenant' is a legal agreement.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Another is called:

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
There is also:

the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

the Declaration of the Rights of the Child

the Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons

the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons

the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

the Convention against Discrimination in Education

And there have been others. The words of the Universal Declaration are very general. These other lists try to be more detailed. They try to meet the special needs of particular groups of people (like children).
What about Australia? This is a rich country, where most people are well fed. We have houses, schools, hospitals and many other services. We think of ourselves as free and we like to believe that these good things are there for all Australians and that everybody gets his or her human rights.

We like to think, in other words, that everyone who lives here gets a fair go.
Laws have to be passed and they have to be used. For example: the Aboriginal people of Australia have often found it very hard to get the kind of things they ought, as human beings, to have. The story is the same for many people who came to live here after World War II, for many poor and disabled people, and many women. Their lives are nowhere near as full and as happy as they ought to be.

Well, they don't.

Human rights do not just happen. They have to be made to happen.
How do you think anyone would feel if they were not allowed to live a normal life because they or their parents came from another country? How would you feel if you were always treated differently because your skin was a colour that those around you did not like? How would you feel if, just because you were a girl, there were things you were not expected to do, even though you knew you could do them and most boys already did?
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hanging ideas about what is right, and changing the laws that go with them, can take a long time. People have to argue against what they believe to be wrong.
And the arguments go on. They have not stopped. It is up to us to take part in them if more people (not just here, but in other places too — people like Maria, like Shanti, like Ben) are finally to get their human rights.
In 1981, the Australian Government passed the Human Rights Commission Act. This said that all Commonwealth laws and those in the Australian Capital Territory (but not those of the States or the Northern Territory) should abide by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and by three of the Declarations listed on page 17.
The Human Rights Commission Act has brought together a group of people named the Human Rights Commission. This has an office in Canberra, and other offices in other cities. Its job is to see that Australians know about all these rights — and that everybody gets them. Thus:

anyone in Australia who thinks he or those in Australia who believe they she is not getting the human rights have been treated badly because of he or she is entitled to, or their race, colour, national or ethnic background can complain to the Human Rights Commission. Someone will look into their complaints for them, and see what can be done.
It is the Commission's job also to study the ways in which the idea of human rights can be used in Australia to make our lives better.

It is the Commission's job to find out how the idea of human rights can best be taught to students in universities and schools. The more people come to know about human rights (what they mean and why they are important) the better.
One day, perhaps, everyone everywhere will get a fair go.
Note for students
Do discuss human rights with your parents and teachers. They can help explain the different words and ideas, and tell you more about what they mean.

Note for teachers
This booklet has been prepared by the Human Rights Commission as part of a course on human rights. Do write for further details:
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