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The Heifer Calf

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“It is a heifer calf” said Venbha’s grandfather rejoicing about the new born in their family. Venbha just got up from her bed rubbing her eyes and yawning drowsily. She took out the bed sheet and went out to see the new born.

In the cowshed, the seven-year-old little Venbha saw her grandmother labouring the cow that has recently delivered a girl. “See, how beautifully looking at you”. She said pointing at the new born.

“You’ve got another friend to play with” Venbha’s granny added.

“Shall I touch it?” asked Venbha reaching her hand almost near the calf.

“No, No, You’re not supposed to do until I clean it properly”

Venbha took a quilt kept at the corner of the shed, spread it and sat on it, watching her granny washing the cow with the coir fibre.

She rubbed the body of the cow with warm water and cleaned its tail and the vaginal part, taking away the discharges that came out during calving. She did the same process twice, to keep the cow fresh and to avoid the discomfort.

“Did you see? The calf is born on Friday early morning. It is a good sign and good luck for our family. It is beginning of good time, my elders used to say.” uttered Venbha’s grandfather carrying a vessel.

He sat down in squatting position to milk the colostrum from the cow.

“Mama make some cake out of this colostrum. I love to eat it” said Venbha looking at her mother who was holding her sister Nethra in her left hip.

Mama nodded agreeing.

Mama got the colostrum from her father-in-law and took it to prepare cake. She left Venbha with her younger sister Nethra to play with.

Nethra has just learned walking. Sometimes she crawled and sometimes she walked dancing with her unbalancing legs. They were playing in the outer yard when their grandfather ran towards the cowshed in emergency.

Venbha followed her grandfather through her eyes. He rushed into the shed to see the calf which was hurt.

The calf attempted standing up but failed hurting its left knee. He applied some coconut oil mixed with turmeric on it.

Few hours later, Mama served them cake made out of colostrum. It was thick and jelly like. She added dry ginger, ellachi, and pepper powder along with brown sugar. She crushed everything together mixed it with the thick milk and let it steamed it for almost an hour.

Every time when the cow delivers a baby, the family will be served with this cake for first three days. They all love to eat it. Especially Nethra with her half mushrooming teeth in the front row used to chew it and ask for more. Everyone had their share, while Nethra was busy with eating and disturbing others pulling their plates.

“Ah-Ah-Ah” Nethra opened her mouth widely asking for a piece from her grandfather. He scorned at her yelling “Don’t you know not to disturb me?” “You are a disgrace for my status being born as a girl. You know I am one of the richest men in this village” spreading his right hand across. “You are an ill-luck to me. You can bring nothing and just a girl whom I can’t call as heir to my family” crying out, he stood up leaving the half eaten cakes on the plate.

Tears roll down Mama’s cheek but kept quiet. Nethra couldn’t understand what he said but she knew that he scolded her. Venbha who is always been a little princess to her grandfather looked astonishingly why he is shouting at her. She was confused at his attitude towards her sister right from her birth.

Mama named her elder one as Venbha which means the poetic lines or the metric used in writing poetry. She believed that person with this name is overambitious and built a strong future for themselves. Mama also named her younger as Nethra that means ‘vision’. She always wanted her kids to be visionaries.

Few days later, the calf grew up slowly and it has adapted to this place. Nowadays it started to eat grass. Sometimes Venbha used to collect straws and give to her new friend which she named Lakshmi. The name was suggested by her grandfather, which means goddess of wealth and prosperity. As days passed, Lakshmi started playing with Venbha and Nethra. Whenever they go near her with handful of straws, it jumps as an act of acceptance or rejoice.

One day Venbha went with her grandfather to let Lakshmi graze in the field. Lakshmi with her usual enthusiasm jumped and ran loosening the rope from the hands of grandfather. “Hey, stop, lur-lur” grandfather called it but it did not stop. It ran and fell into a pit. Venbha and her grandfather ran after it and found Lakshmi inside the pit.

He took the rope that surrounded the neck of the calf and handed it to Venbha. He asked her to pull it out and pushed the calf from down giving her strength to climb up. Venbha with put her full effort with her small hand. “Yes, Yes pull the same way, drag it out” cried the old man.

“Come out Lakshmi, how long am I to struggle, my palms have become red, come out soon” begged the small girl.

With some efforts Lakshmi came out with scratches in the both the legs. Some wound started to bleed. The old man sat down. He took Lakshmi’s leg in one hand examining the wound. “why did you run so fast? How long am I to hold you? See what you have done? Running uncontrably and hurting one’s own self? He questioned looking at the calf.

Lakshmi did not react or nod. It just simply looked at its worried owner. Venbha watched everything and looking at the love of her grandfather towards the calf, asked him, “Thatha do you like Lakshmi?”

He replied “Yes, what is the doubt in that? She is our *Komatha*”

“What is meant by *Komatha*?” enquired the little girl.

“It means Gods Cow. God himself coming in the form of Cow and this Lakshmi is special to me. She is the symbol of our prosperity” he answered still holding the leg of Lakshmi and rubbing off the mud from it.

Then the girl asked with apprehension, “Thatha, mmm” looking at his eyes “if you can love an animal in this way or praise it as God, then why do you scold Nethra as an ill-luck girl? Is she not a girl baby like Lakshmi?”

The old man was speechless and spell bound. Ashamed by his granddaughter’s question, stood up, took the rope and left the place looking down leaving Venbha unanswered.

Author Bio-note:

Dr. P. Saranya has completed her PhD from Government Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu. Her areas of interest are diasporic Literature, Sri Lankan Literature, British Literature and Canadian Literature. She is interested in writing fiction and short stories.