

The Village of Dung

(Short story)

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The small sleepy village was perched on the hill overlooking the purling creek that fed vineyards, wheat farms, and vegetable plots. The residents of the village ate the wheat of their farms and drank the milk of their buffaloes. They spent the summer days under the shady trees, chit-chatting and singing songs.

During winter nights the families sat around fires, snacked on roasted peanuts and avidly listened to the stories told by the elders.

One day, a maniacally adventurous explorer stumbled upon the village. The long journey and the punishing sun had given him a deep tan complexion. ‘The sun was on the verge of sinking when I discovered the village, and it took my breath away at first sight,’ he gleefully jotted in his dusty diary. The villagers accommodated him in the community centre and brought him food. He stayed for several weeks and made entries in his diary, first about the flora and fauna of the village, and then about the language, religion and ethnicity of the villagers. At night the villagers gathered in the community centre and he regaled them with stories about the life of the city dwellers.

One night he said to them, ‘You’ve tons of milk. Why don’t you take it to the city and sell it?’

‘You must be joking—the city people buy milk?’ one farmer asked.

‘No, I’m not joking—the city people buy and sell milk,’ the explorer replied.

‘Our ancestors strictly forbade us to sell milk,’ the village chief said. ‘In our language, we’ve the same word for light, eyesight and milk. To sell milk is sacrilege in our culture’.

One morning while the explorer was doing his packing, he said again, ‘Milk sells in the city.’

The villagers stared at him in disbelief, so he said someone should accompany him to the city and see for himself. The villagers held a long meeting, and at last an intrepid man was readied with a small milk churn strapped to his back, and he accompanied the explorer into the city.

Some days later the man returned to the village. Men, women and children poured out of the houses to welcome him. 'Milk sells in the city,' he said, showing the villagers a handful of shiny coins.

On the second trip to the city, the intrepid man was accompanied by his cousin. On the third trip they went as three and designated themselves the village milk sellers. Before long the entire village was selling milk. Then came winter. During the cold nights, the villagers sat around fires and talked about the city, the money, the dearness and insecticides.

After some years, the city people ran a small freight train to the village to expedite the transferring of the milk. Sometimes the train was stopped in its tracks and raided by savage bandits. So the city people built an underground pipeline to carry milk from the village to the city. In order to keep the bandits away from the milk pipeline, the village men were enlisted in the freshly-minted Elite Milk Militia.

All was quiet and the milk continued to flow. But over time the city people began to suspect the villagers were diluting the milk with water. Experts from the city were quickly dispatched to the village to solve the problem by permanently hooking the udders of the buffaloes to the milking machines. It proved a great solution for the city, as the machines never stopped sucking the milk, leaving nothing to chance and even less to the villagers.

Then one day the villagers started to complain. 'Our babies don't have milk to drink?', they said.

The city people replied by letter, 'We'll send you a truck full of white powder; mix it with water and give it to your children. This powder-mix is far more refreshing and nourishing than the milk that comes from your dark, ugly beasts.'

The next day a truck full of bags of white powder trundled into the village. The villagers tore open the bags and emptied them into the pond on the outskirts of the village. They rolled up their trousers and waded into the pond to stir the water with their feet, spades and sticks. Soon they were standing in a chalky white mixture. Then the mothers brought their children to the pond to drink. But as night fell, tomcats, jackals and foxes gathered at the pond to lap the chalky white mixture, so the villagers hired a watchman to keep the wild animals away. And although the watchman succeeded in repelling the wild animals, his rifle was useless against the fish, frogs and crabs that lived in the milk pond.

Time kept speeding.

One day a written order came to village by way of the city. 'Feed pistachios to the buffaloes, give them rose water to drink, don't let them walk,' it read. 'With walking the buffaloes' milk dries up'.

The next morning, a truck brought a load of massive, custom-made padlocks to the village, along with more instruction for the villagers. ‘Secure the legs of the buffaloes with the padlocks,’ the instructions read.

So the villagers did as they were told and locked the buffaloes into place. Then, after some time, the city people issued another decree to the village, ordering the villagers to replace the old names of the buffaloes with the modern names concocted in the city.

The city veterinarians believed that the modern names would exert a pleasant effect on the brains of the buffaloes, which would produce a pleasant effect on their stomachs, which in turn would relax their mammary glands and thus raise the buffaloes’ milk production by 65.73 per cent.

The new names were applied.

Then one morning a group of painters from the city descended upon the village and painted the buffaloes white, red and green.

The next day, a courier delivered to the villagers a mechanical buffalo stud of improved variety for breeding purposes. The buffalo stud had the appearance of a grey langur while its outside was covered with crimson velvet. Around its neck was a booklet, dangling on silk string. The booklet said that with the new stud, a new breed of buffaloes would come in green, purple, pink and beige, and the new breed would have rose bouquets instead of black curly horns, and they would have golden silk tassels for tails.

The new stud could not tell when a buffalo cow was in estrus—it was only fond of mounting. After mounting a cow, the stud would doze off and remain in that position for days. When a buffalo was not available, it mounted a donkey, a tree, a wall or a heap of manure.

One day the city people saw from their long-range surveillance cameras that the village was sinking into animal excrement. This was alarming to the experts in the city, who concluded that bacteria from the excrement posed a grave threat to the milk. So they concocted a plan to hoist all the buffaloes high in the air over the village with the crawler cranes. Lifted away from the growing piles of excrement, the buffaloes instead blocked the sun from reaching the village. When the wind blew, they swung back and forth like inflated balloons and would sometimes become entangled. When the quadrupeds defecated, the village was blitzed by poo bombs, and the villagers would push their children under beds or tables.

In a few months the buffaloes had shriveled into skin-covered skeletons, and they were so low on energy that they could not even moo. But sometimes they managed to turn their bleary eyes to the verdant pastures where once upon a time they had leisurely cropped the wild grasses while the birds chirped and flitted in the nearby trees.

Time kept speeding.

As the years passed, the buffaloes produced more shit and less milk, and the village again began to sink into manure. Then one day the buffaloes stopped producing milk altogether, and so the milking machines started sucking their blood. But the city's food experts were ready, for when the blood reached the city, they mixed it with a wonder chemical that turned it into synthetic milk.

Then, after a very long time, the buffaloes stopped yielding blood, and the city people forgot about the village.

A century later, a fearless adventurer from the city set out on a great journey of exploration. He ventured into the wilderness and wandered freely. One day he stopped to take a leak on a tree and heard low voices coming from a nearby dunghill. He poked his walking stick into the mound of excrement. Then he squeezed into a narrow pathway and entered the heap of feces. What he found within enthralled him: bean-sized buffaloes grazing on minuscule mushrooms, ant-sized men and women chatting and doing their chores, and rye-sized children playing marbles made from dung. The adventurer scribbled down the time and date of the discovery in his soiled diary. When he returned to the city, he told the newspapers, and TV and radio stations of this newly discovered village.

Soon archaeologists, economists, philosophers, poets, anthropologists, and sundry scientists descended on the village.

They gazed with fascination at the tiny creatures crawling around in the dunghill. The visitors' skulls were bursting with ideas about what they could do with what they could see. They returned to the city and published bulky books and theses with their theories of how the humans and buffaloes of the village could have shrunk.

The village was soon designated a city heritage site. The international media complained that the country where the village of shrunken creatures was located was ill-equipped to protect the site. World leaders lashed out at the country's rulers: 'You daft idiots, you aren't doing enough to save this marvel of nature from harsh climate. If you're strapped for cash we'll give money. If you lack expertise we'll provide expertise.'

A palatial white building with a lofty dome was erected in the heart of the city, and the newly discovered village was dug up and transported to the site. The façade of the building carried the bold caption The Village of Dung.

Tourists from every nook and cranny of the globe came in enormous numbers for the opening of The Village of Dung. ‘You people are so lucky that you’ve inherited The Village of Dung,’ the tourists said as they made their way to the great white dome, lit by thousands of lights.

The building’s white marble floor shone as if it were made of diamonds. The curator of The Village of Dung—a portly little man in a blue safari outfit—scurried into the building, followed by a swarm of tourists, students and researchers. He delivered a short lecture on the history of The Village. Then he turned a key and opened the glass door.

‘Today the weather is friendly, so we can open the door of The Village of Dung,’ the curator said over half-moon spectacles as the visitors held their breath. ‘It’s awfully fragile, you know’. He gingerly inserted his right index finger into the pile of animal waste, collecting a great number of men, women, children and buffaloes on his finger, which he held before the gawking visitors.

‘This is the essence of creation,’ he proclaimed. ‘Can any other civilization show us something like this?’ He kissed the tiny creatures crawling on his fingers. ‘I’ve dedicated my entire life to them. They’re my children—or rather, I’m their child. Amazing!’ He kissed them again as tears filled his puffy, piggy eyes.

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