

MR. BISWAS LOSES A CALF - AND HIS FATHER

Mr. Biswas grew.

Malnutrition gave him the shallowest of chests and the thinnest of limbs but he was never aware of being hungry. It never bothered him that he didn't go to school. Life was only unpleasant because the pundit had forbidden him to go near ponds and rivers. So he could not cool himself from the hot Trinidad sun.

Every Sunday morning Raghu, his father, took his two brothers to swim in a stream not far off and Mr. Biswas stayed at home to be bathed by his mother, Bipti. He played house with his sister, Dehuti. They made mud fireplaces and cooked a few grains of rice in empty condensed milk tins.

His elder brothers took no part in these amusements. They spoke with blades of grass between their teeth; they drank noisily and sighed passing the backs of their hands across their mouths. They ate enormous quantities of rice, patted their bellies and belched.

When Mr. Biswas was six Dhari, their next door neighbour, bought a cow in calf. And when the calf was born Dhari offered Mr. Biswas the job of taking water to the calf at a penny a week.

Mr. Biswas loved the calf. He loved it for its big head that looked so insecurely attached to its slender body, for its knobbly shaky legs, its big sad eyes and pink stupid nose. He did more than take water to the calf. He took it for walks across damp fields of razor grass, but he was unable to understand why the calf resented being led from one place to another.

On one of these walks Mr. Biswas discovered the stream. The cool sound of water blended with the creaks of the tall bamboos. The calf stood idle and unhappy beside him, not caring for bamboo leaves.

He continued to go to the forbidden stream. He liked to spit into it but he couldn't spit as well as his eldest brother who, with casual violence, could make his spit resound wherever it fell, but it pleased Mr. Biswas to see his spit circling slowly above the black fish before being carried away into the main stream.

Then one day Mr. Biswas lost the calf. He hunted for it along the banks and in the adjoining fields. He called for it, mooing softly so as not to attract the attention of people.

P.2

Abruptly he decided that the calf was lost for good. In the meantime the best thing for him to do would be to hide until it was found. He decided that the best place for him to hide would be at home. He made his way with caution to the small back verandah.

From the verandah he went into his father's room, slipped under the bed and prepared to wait. His ears picked up the sounds in and around the hut. All at once he became alert. He recognised, the neighbour Dhari's voice.

"Raghu, where is that youngest son of yours?"

"With your calf, I suppose."

"Well he isn't," said Dhari.

"I am sure nothing bad has happened," said Bipti. "He knows he mustn't go near water."

In his hiding place Mr. Biswas was startled by the sound of wailing. It came from Dhari. "The pond, the pond," he wailed. "Raghu's son has drowned my calf in the pond. A nice calf. My first calf. My only calf." "Nonsense," Raghu said. "The boy doesn't go near water." "Oh," Bipti cried. "Stop this bickering-ickering and let us go look for the boy."

A chattering crowd had gathered. "I will go and dive for him," said Lakhan, the Carter. "He is my son," Raghu said. "If anybody is going to dive for him it will be me. And I pray to God, Dhari, that when I get to the bottom of that pond I find your wretched calf!"

"Witnesses," Dhari cried. "These words will have to be repeated in court."

"To the pond, to the pond," the villagers cried. "Raghu is going to dive for his son in the pond."

Mr. Biswas, under his father's bed, listened. From the road chatter and the sound of footsteps rose then slowly faded. A frog honked then made a sucking bubbling noise. The crickets were already chirping. Mr. Biswas was alone in the dark hut and frightened.

The pond lay in swampland. It was full of abrupt depths and the villagers liked to think these were immeasurable. By the time the crowd had assembled Raghu was already beneath the water. "He's been down there too long," said Lakhan, the carter.

But before Lakhan could take off his shirt Raghu broke the surface. The carter gave him a hand up. "I believe there is something down there," Raghu said. But it is very dark."

P.3

Far away the low trees were black against the fading sky. The orange streaks of sunset were smudged with grey as if by dirty thumbs. In a moment Raghu was in the pond again. The water broke and rippled. The gleam it got from the sky was fading.

Lakhan said, "He's coming up again. I believe he's got something."

They knew what it was from Dhari's cry. Bipti, and all the women began to scream while the men helped to lift the calf to the bank.

Rhagu remained where he was, breathing deeply, his dhoti clinging to his skin. Then he was back under the water and the villagers were silent again. They waited a long time, looking at the calf, looking at the pool.

Lakhan said, "Something has happened."

Suddenly they were all still. Someone had sneezed. They turned to see Mr. Biswas standing some distance away in the gloom, the toe of one foot scratching the ankle of the other.

Lakhan plunged into the pond.

"That boy." Dhari said. "He has murdered my calf and now he has eaten up his own father."

Lakhan brought up Raghu unconscious. They rolled him on the damp grass and pumped water out of his mouth and nostrils. But it was too late.

At the funeral, Mr. Biswas, as the baby of the family, was treated by the mourners with honour and sympathy though this was touched with a little dread. The widow Bipti was bathed. Her hair, still wet, was neatly parted and the parting filled with red henna. Then the henna was scooped out and the parting filled with charcoal dust. She was now a widow forever.

Cremation was forbidden and Raghu was to be buried. He lay in a coffin in the bedroom, dressed in his finest dhoti, jacket and turban. The coffin was strewn with marigolds, which matched the turban.

"Photo now," said Bipti. "All together. For the last time."

The photographer, who had been smoking under the mango tree, went into the hut and said, "Too dark. Take it outside. Lean it against the mango tree."

In the end some of the men took the coffin out to the verandah and stood it against the wall. "Careful." said Lakhan, "Don't let him fall out." "Goodness," said Bipti, "All the marigold have dropped out." "Leave them," said the photographer, "Is a nice little touch. Flowers on the ground. Five people together," he went on, "Hard to know how to arrange you. Look, look! Why nobody ain't put anything to chock up the coffin and prevent it from slipping?"

This was attended to.

"All right," the photographer said. "Mother and biggest son on either side. Next to mother, second son and daughter. Next to second son, smaller son.

There was more advice from the villagers.

"Make them look at the coffin."

"At the mother."

"At the youngest boy."

"Tell them to look at me." said the photographer.

This was done and he went back under his black cloth.

"All right." said Bipti, finally. "Draw your photo!"

When the photo was printed Mr. Biswas astonished at his smallness. And everyone in the photograph had large staring eyes, which seemed to have been outlined in black. And Bipti was right when she said it would be a record of the family all together for the last time.
