

The Dogs of Dolphin Lane

The day the dog catchers of the City Corporation finally came and quickly rounded up, killed and carted away the stray dogs, the people of Dolphin Lane heaved a sigh of great relief, despite the sudden action and the cruelty of the catchers' technique.

Those living in Dolphin Lane had been through great misery for long, routinely being visited by what they had discovered to be a menace. Every night just as stillness was about to settle in the Lane – after the cars had stopped honking and the fog had wrapped the lampposts with blind shrouds – the timing would be just right. No sooner had the tired and sleepy souls crawled into beds to drop their heads on single or twin pillows than the menace would tear through the silence. And it would be the beginning of a nightlong torment.

First, one or two forlorn howls. Then a few more. And soon a torrent of riotous clamor. Once started, it would continue for ever – a planned ritual, so it seemed, in return for what they endured during the day. The kicks, the hurled stones or what you will.

The canine numbers had been growing. No one in the Dolphin Lane actually noticed – not a sight to feast one's eyes on. One bitch bred as many as seven to eight puppies at a time. Some of them starved to death, while some got lost under the running wheels. Still, a good number survived and kept on growing. And the people in the Lane through their regular nocturnal suffering finally realized that the survival rate was quite high despite recurrent deaths.

In the beginning the people had thought that since dogs were dogs – alert and sensitive – their barking was about something that they sensed. Maybe

thieves, maybe something else which none but the dogs would know. And although no one had trained them, masterless that they were, it could perhaps be an over-alertness of their instincts that drove them rip apart the night's silence.

But how could one do without sleep all night! Not even rest one's tired head on the pillow!

No one had thought of a solution. Because as the nights passed by and daylight broke out, the nightly problem remained forgotten under the toilsome rat race that ran all day long. But as soon as night returned crashing down on them with the routine horror, all they could do was toss and turn in their sleepless beds.

It was when things were at such a state that one morning, the City Corporation's dog-catching squad raided Dolphin Lane, and as if by sheer magic, caught, killed and hurriedly dumped the wandering packs in a truck and raced away. Had the Dolphinites not witnessed the spectacle with their own eyes, they wouldn't have believed that a job as complex and elaborate could be accomplished with such competence.

Credit indeed went to the catching squad. They had done their job with great professional skill and discipline. First they had dispersed themselves in small groups of twos or threes to lure the dogs into catching range with pieces of bread or biscuits. They also made inviting sounds from their mouths to further trick the dogs into coming nearer. And as soon as a dog responded approaching close enough, one of the catchers would grab the victim with strong iron tongs, while his partner quickly thrust a foot-long syringe right through the upper neck like a drill penetrating into solid earth. It was quick work, delivered with the right timing. What followed was a faint whining until the victim choked and dropped still.

The rest of the job was simple enough – dragging the light, middle and heavyweight bodies onto an open truck and moving away.

Those in the Lane who had watched the proceedings up close – shopkeepers, laundrymen, venders, passers-by, ‘blind’ beggars – didn’t get to catch all the details. The dazzling competence of the dogcatchers bewildered them. Later, when they encountered each other with shock and surprise, words got lost in their mouths. The late November sky hung overhead as timeless and distant as ever.

Despite the havoc wrecked by the dogs night after night, nobody from the Dolphin Lane had initiated the action secretly. The fact remained that the dogcatchers were a specially trained squad of the City Corporation, and lest they forgot their hard acquired skills they rehearsed their catching practices in chosen localities a number of times every year. There was a time when their technique was crude. Instead of poison-filled syringes, they used huge wooden hammers. A single knock at the back of the head was perfect to make a dog sleep eternally. In comparison, the present-day device was smart and convenient. Over and above, since it was easy to identify the wandering herds, the catchers could successfully conduct their operation in chosen areas without having to seek help from the local residents.

II

The truck-ride of the dogs marked the day with a refreshing change for the people in their daily gossips. For the youngsters it was great fun. They passed a busy day endlessly recounting the event and narrating their reactions to it.

Reactions of the grown-ups, however, were mixed. Some of them credited the City Corporation for its timely move. They praised the City Mayor saying that dog catching (with such skill and swiftness) was indeed

crucial to the Mayor's scheme to make urban life peaceful. They wished in the coming days similar raids would target stray cats, beggars, footpath-occupying vendors, muggers, toll collectors, drug addicts, bribe takers etcetera etcetera, and that all would be dispensed with, though not necessarily through similar truck rides.

There were others who spoke differently. They expressed their utter disgust and termed the event stupid eyewash to hide the authority's failure to attend to a hundred important things such as – traffic jam, flies, mosquitoes, garbage, water logging, robberies, murders and so on. They made predictions that in the coming election campaign the ruling party would flaunt dog-catching as a grand achievement of its rule and exhibit some desiccated dog tails as glaring proofs of its claim.

Whatever the reactions, there could be no disputing that the lives of the people in Dolphin Lane had been made miserable by dogs, and so after their epoch-making exit through the truck-ride, the people were fully convinced that the approaching nights would be full of peace, with sleep.

This made the men, women and children joyous. In fact, they were shocked to imagine for how long their eyes had not been visited by sleep – that they hadn't dipped into that mysterious stillness where colorful fishes called dreams danced and swirled with their resplendent fins and tails! How they had passed night after night haunted by bad dreams! They felt distressed to think how the agony of their life lurked all day long only to hammer on their doors at the dead of night!

At long last, they were going to sleep. They felt exhilarated, and to some of them, it seemed like freedom. Nightlong freedom after the tiring captivity of the day.

A few nights passed by. Quiet, peaceful nights. As the nights progressed,

dark and thick, the Dolphinites were amazed by what seemed to them an enchanting stillness that shielded their senses from the outside world – an unearthly quietness they thought only the dogless nights were able to deliver. And because of this overwhelming stillness, they were able to catch the feeblest of noises around them; at times it was their own breathing that took them by surprise. An altogether new experience, they mused. They couldn't recall if they had ever been through such a wonderful interregnum of silence.

After long chaotic nights their hearts and minds were immersed in an all-captivating silence, but there were disarrayed thoughts too whirling about their minds. They thought of events – lost or frayed – from their childhood. They thought of nature, of the splendor and majesty of nature offered by silence. And more than anything else, they thought of freedom – this unseeing freedom they wished they could touch and smell, apply it all over their bodies like some sweet aromatic oil!

As the thoughts hovered about, they let themselves sink more and more into the depths of stillness. But trying to shut their eyes for sleep seemed neither smooth nor trouble-free. It was the continual throbbing of their lonely or yearning hearts that they came upon every time they thought of their long overdue sleep. They had missed this magic ripple, they thought, this beating of their hearts in such harmony and rhythm all these years. An extraordinary gift of silence, but they couldn't make out what to do with it. They couldn't sleep.

They discussed their new nightly experiences amongst themselves. They felt good talking about something so different and exceptional; but going about narrating their intimate, personal feelings to one another they discovered that these were neither uniquely personal nor exceptional but

unvaryingly common to them all. They could feel through each other's experiences, could see through each other's hearts. However, because of the sleepless nights, their eyes were itchy and swollen, and with their swollen eyes they looked at each other and soon found themselves as though engulfed in the silhouettes of shadows and sunlight of the dogless Dolphin Lane.

III

After the successful raid, the City Corporation conducted similar raids in nearby localities with the same deftness and speed. Newspapers carried front-page stories commending the good work. Life in the neighboring areas too had been rendered as miserable due to the nightly turbulence; and with the exodus of dogs through similar truck rides, the people living in those localities heaved a sigh of similar relief like the Dolphinites – despite the sudden action and the cruelty of the catchers' technique. And just as the Dolphinites had experienced, the stillness of the dogless nights stirred up strange emotions in their minds and their eyelids too remained open all night.

Neither sleep nor freedom seemed to be approaching. They just looked to be creeping in but cleverly slipped past, and in the wake of the fleeting images emerged, slowly, a restlessness that held onto their bloodshot, sleepless eyes.

They wondered what it was that they didn't have now! What it was that the tranquil nights failed to offer! Their hearts had yearned for this silence for so long!

Was it something they missed but didn't know of? They asked themselves but failed to find an answer.

Was it something that they didn't see or feel but which had lived in their heads, within the closet of their minds or inside their hearts – like the protective charms of amulets! They didn't have it now! Gone.

With their swollen eyes they looked shattered. Day after day, they thought and wondered, got weary, weak and at times totally distraught.

Some of them remembered the snouts and the eyes of the departed dogs – males, bitches, puppies in herds, some tailless, some lame and mauled, with festering sores oozing blood and puss. They were of varying shapes and colors.

They were everywhere. Weren't they? In front of the houses, groceries, butcher shops, in drains, garbage bins, in all the spaces eyes could travel. Also deep down the hearts of the Dolphinites like some inseparable limbs and appendages.

As a matter of fact, some limbs and appendages of the Dolphinites were also carted away along with the dogs when no one was watching. Just about when they had thought of freedom and heaved a sigh of relief.

Translated by the author