

Tara's Mangoes

This is the story of two good friends, Shanta and Tara. Shanta had everything she wanted; Tara rarely got anything, not even enough to eat most days. Shanta had a huge lovely home, in fact, she had more than one house to live in. Tara had none, but she would seek shelter in storms, under a huge leafy branch of a big tree, but she did get miserably wet, all the same. Shanta had loving parents, Tara could just about remember her mother, who had been kind before she died. Shanta and Tara were good friends, and looked forward to seeing each other, but they led very different lives. This is the story of one of their occasional meetings.

Tara was hungry, as she almost always was. She knew from meek experience that females had to make do with whatever was spared to them. But even when very hungry, or feeling weak from doing without, she always thought first of all the babies that needed to be fed, and many times would pass over her meagre portion shyly to a feeding mother. Such was life, and she did not complain. About the big, rough and selfish males who ruled her community, what could one say, except that they behaved like males? Despite every privation, life had much to offer, babies, beauty, sunlight, conditional freedoms, and just the simple joy of living, of the close companionship of females, of tending with wonder the growing young, and of gathering food, whenever found.

Professor Dwarkinath Govindaraja, descended from a wealthy family, maintained a rich estate in the countryside, to which he and his family retreated during weekends, especially if he needed the quiet of natural surroundings to compose a paper refuting the opinions of others not so well learned. His large garden was the envy of the countryside, laden as it was with carefully and scientifically tended fruit trees. But it was also an extremely well-guarded garden, and agricultural labourers, girls on their way to school, and traveling mendicants, all peeped longingly at the fruit, so near to see, and yet completely out of reach. With a sigh, they would pass on. The garden came into spectacular beauty during the mango season. In this season, the garden hung low with big round *jehangirs* and firm smooth *himayats*. There were even early fruiting *neelams* and late ripening *totaparis* among the plentitude of *benishans* that were the envy of the region. Professor Govindaraja had a passion for the fruit, and grew most known varieties, though more for continuing research purposes than for his own table. In fact, the professor would get quite upset if he found the best fruit served to his guests or his own children, before specific permission had been sought, and given, for the numbered and labeled fruit. But he did not always get his way, for his normally passive wife mutinously differed with him on the importance of genetic research, especially when her children longed for the fruit of the trees.

If the good professor's own children had only limited access to mangoes, Tara and her famished tribe had absolutely no chance that the guardians of the garden would ever permit them to steal a few, though she acknowledged that her bullying male leaders were more adept at a quick grab than most. So, that warm summer morning after hanging about the road for a bit, and once again regretfully gauging the distance between the high outside wall and the nearest mango tree, her tribe were preparing to turn about, and go off to the safe reaches of scrub jungle, where at least they could rest in the shade. The three black, fast-sprinting Dobermans patrolling the garden were clear deterrents against any foolhardy attempt to leap over the wall and try and grab a fruit or two. The professor with scientific accuracy had set back his trees from the road to prevent just such an attempt.

But Tara was young, and ever hopeful, and like other hungry beings, decided to circle the high walls one more time. Taking a long detour to skirt the open ground on the left, she reached a side-road at the other side of the estate, lined with self-tending *gul mohars* flowering in red and gold profusion. This was actually the front of the mansion, and a leisurely breakfast was laid out on the manicured lawns for the family. Livered servants went in and out with freshly baked bread, bazaar-bought fruit, tea, coffee, omelettes, and *dosas*. Gently, without anyone perceiving, Tara climbed a short forked tree, and peered out timidly at the mouth-watering scene below. Sensing there would be no immediate depredatory attempt on the fruit trees, the Dobermans had also come round to the front to be with their master. One of them noticed her at once, but held his tongue in a dignified manner, just waiting for her to make a false move. Shanta, the little girl in the family, and Tara's firm friend, was chatting away merrily with her mother, and did not notice her hungry friend among the flowering branches by the front gate.

Tara's eyes softened as she saw her little friend; at least she was eating well. She was about to turn and drop back softly from the tree, when she noticed a large tabby cat, withdrawn in meditation on the high wall just below her. The Dobermans ignored the cat, just as they ignored Tara, for they were business like, and would attack instantly only if the prey was within reach, otherwise they conserved their strength like trained guards, and turned their attention to catch a morsel or two from their master's table.

Tara looked at the cat; the cat looked at no one, but dozed in the dappled shade, while the coppersmiths were already beginning to sound the tempo of increasing heat. Tara pictured the shape of the estate in her mind's eye. It would be a long run back for the dogs down the long sides of the mansion to the farthest mango tree. If they could be distracted for a few minutes, some of her tribe, the most courageous, could pluck a few of the heavy, luscious mangoes, whose perfume wafted all round in the heavy air, making her faint with desire. To think was to decide, to decide was to act. With a blood-curdling screech she pounced on the cat and knocked it from its high perch, down at the very feet of the Dobermans.

Pandemonium was not the word. With instant agility, the cat leaped up even before its paws were all four on the ground, and cleared a large flower pot of Zinnias, dashed under the heavily laden coffee table, then over a chair, to leap on to the turban of a servant, and fall down on a stool, before scrambling up a window-ledge. The three Dobermans in full tongue were not so agile, and knocked over flower pots, barged painfully into the professor's knee, upset the tea pot to the screams of the maids, and the stern shouts of their master. Everyone was standing up and yelling as the dogs ran between and round their legs after the pesky cat. The cat's siesta had been rudely disturbed, and the cat was mad. Sitting in safety on the sunshade above the window, the cat spat at the dogs, and reached a paw down threateningly. The dogs did ungainly leaps, completely ploughing under a bed of marigolds. The din could most probably be heard in the distant village.

This distraction and Tara's thought waves sent an instant message to her tribe. Not only the powerful males, but all, all of them, the young females carrying babies almost as large as themselves, all leapt over the wall in complete silence, reached the nearest mango tree in three bounds, and started to strip it clean of prize mangoes. Of course all this excitement created its own noise, and the professor who was ever on jealous lookout to see his precious mangoes reached the laboratory table shouted at the dogs to give chase, but they were busy with the cat.

‘Rosaiah! Akbar! Drive the damn dogs to the back! The monkeys are in my garden!’ shouted the professor. The dogs then heard the monkey sounds coming from far off, and tried to dash to the back. However, in all that confusion, Ramulamma, the local midwife, who attended on them whenever they were down for the weekend, had accidentally shut the wicket-gate that led from the front lawns to the back. The dogs howled and danced in frustration as great as their master’s.

‘Ramulamma! Stupid woman! Don’t come running to me! Oh, God, never mind that spilled tea pot! Open that gate! Why can’t you understand English! Open, Open that gate!’ The woman got so confused with all the shouting that she fumbled with the latch for an eternity, while the male servants impatiently tried to get her to stand back so that they could release the penned up dogs to the back garden.

In her frenzied attempts, she had done the wrong thing and pushed the latch down so hard, it stuck fast in the rusted clasp. At long last – actually only a few minutes had elapsed – Akbar was able to push up the iron latch by main force, and the released dogs gave furious chase. But for most of the monkeys those few precious minutes were enough to strip the tree clean. They were down the tree and scurrying back to safety, before the dogs had cleared the long sides of the house. The tribe were all clutching fruit, and hence slower, but there was no hope of catching any. The fastest Doberman aimed himself at the last and smallest female laden with fruit and child, but his claws only managed to rake a long red streak through her fur as she swung out of harm’s way.

By now, Shanta the little girl had noticed her friend. ‘Bravo, Tara! Well done! How clever you are, and how wonderfully thoughtful! Did you see Dad, Tara my friend has fed her people. Even, even Napoleon couldn’t have done better!’

The professor was distracted with his loss, but he could not let such unscientific sentiments pass, especially in his own house, and especially from his daughter. ‘Nonsense, Shanta! Monkeys are animals! They cannot think – they, they just act instinctually.’

‘ But Dad, I saw it all! She planned it so cleverly. She jumped on the cat to distract the dogs. She knew the cat wouldn’t be killed, because cats are so fast, and, and she knew there would be enough noise and confusion to give her people a chance. Dad, you’ve got to see that.’

‘Shanta, sit down, sit down, and don’t jump about like that. Listen to me, it’s nice to dream up human characteristics in animals – it’s called anthropomorphism; you are – say it after me, you are anthro-po-mor-phizing that monkey, that is, giving it human characteristics it can never have.’

Shanta had tears in her eyes. ‘But Dad, I’m not anthro-anythingizing her. I know her, we talk with each other, that is Tara my friend, and she is very clever and very brave, and she thinks of others. See, she didn’t do this very clever trick to feed herself, but only for her people, don’t you see, Dad?’

The professor held his child to his heart, and sat down with her in a cane armchair, the loss of his mangoes forgotten for the moment. ‘I was a child like you too, my dear, darling child, so don’t think I am blaming you. No, darling, but I am a scientist now, and I must correct you. You make two mistakes – one, in attributing thought to an animal. You know what Descartes said – you know who Descartes was? He was a very clever Frenchman who lived at about the

same time as D'Artagnan? Now, isn't that interesting? And instead of fighting stupid battles, he shut himself in a stove – just imagine that! – and when he came out, he said, 'I think, therefore I am!' Isn't that a marvellous real story?'

Shanta sniffled. 'I think he was just a silly old Frenchman,' she said. 'I don't have to shut myself in a nasty dirty stove to know I think, and so does Tara, no matter what all the day carts say in France! And she is kind and generous!'

'Darling, that's your second error,' said the professor fondly. 'You are attributing moral qualities to animals. They have none. Descartes once said that the scream of a cat – we just now heard the cat scream, when the monkey attacked it, the scream of a cat has no more significance than 'the creaking of a door.'

'What a horrible man, Dad!' said Shanta pained. 'And why do you keep quoting this horrible man? Tara knows better than that. She didn't want the cat hurt at all, she knew it would come out unscathed, otherwise she never would have jumped on her. Only like creaking of a door, indeed! What a horrible person!'

The professor was at a loss, but went on gamely, anyway. 'Darling, children like you, and uneducated people see significance in animal actions, acts of nature and the rest of it. As a matter of fact, it is all coincidental events. There is no thought, no planning. If anything, just stimulus and response. If that stupid woman Ramulamma hadn't jammed that door, the monkeys would be ruining the day, I assure you.'

The professor's wife had been supervising the clean up, and getting more breakfast served up. But at his last remark she came round. 'I won't have you speak like that about Ramulamma. I would have died, if she hadn't helped me when Shanta was born. She has her limitations, but she is very loyal, and clean. If you hadn't shouted at her, she wouldn't have lost her head, it's your fault, really.'

Husband and wife disappeared into the house arguing. Shanta went up and embraced Ramulamma shyly. 'Thank you, Ramulamma, for keeping that gate shut. Poor monkeys! They have a right to fruit before us! After all, we have so many other things to eat. Thank you for helping dear Tara!' Ramulamma bent down and kissed the child.

'Look! There's Tara,' shouted Shanta. 'Look, she is peering down all worried, because she heard my father being angry with me. Don't worry, dear Tara, our bulls don't bite like yours, at least not yet. Here, you have eaten nothing! You must be so, so hungry, brave, generous Tara! Take this hand of bananas!' And the child threw a bunch of bananas to her monkey friend before any of the servants could stop her. Tara clutched the fruit to her bosom, and with a look that Shanta stoutly declared was a friendly smile, took off through the trees to join her people.