

MY WHITE HORSE
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I have a horse. A white colt. It was barely six months old when I found it lying in a muddy ditch across the river Matla where the land comes down to the water. It was the rainy season and the creature was soaked. I picked it up and brought it home.

It will be two years old this autumn. It is a brighter white now and the brown mark on its forehead is more distinct. It cannot talk but it understands everything I say. When I pat its head he puts his neck down and rubs against me, and when he raises the great brown eyes and looks at me I understand what it wants to say. I have named the colt Shadapal, The White Sail.

My name is Vijay. I was born on the day of the Vijaya Dasami festival. In the courtyard of our house there is an areca palm that was planted the same year. My age was calculated by counting its growth rings. That is what my mother told me.

There were five growth rings on the tree the year my mother fell asleep with high fever and did not get up. The neighbours came and took her away somewhere. Neighbours took father away too when he came home from the fields with snakebite, lay down and did not get up. There were seven rings on the tree that year.

It was the year I began to look after the Mallik's cows. Every morning early, I take them to pasture, let them graze the whole day and bring them home in the evening. Once a year I go across the river to the Matlagang market to buy more cows for my master.

On my way home from the pasture I bring a bundle of fresh grass for Shadapal every evening. Shadapal is a beauty and when, at the sight of the fresh grass he shows his pleasure by tapping the ground with one of his hind legs while eating grass, it is impossible to describe how handsome he looks.

One day after I had put the cows in the cowshed and was carrying the bundle of grass to Shadapal, my way was blocked by Biswambhar, a servant of my master.

“The Raja has sent for you,” he said.

What could I do? It was time for Shadapal's feed.

Biswambhar let me past a number of building, stopping when we came to the Raja's audience chamber. The Raja as puffing at his hubble-bubble as he rested in a comfortable easy chair. His daughter Tuktuk was standing beside him. I bowed, bending from my waist, standing with my hands folded, outside on the verandah.

The Raja took no notice, continuing to smoke without speaking. The thought of Shadapal and how hungry he must be made me restless. The horse must be whinnying for me.

“I hear you have a pony,” the Raja said at last, taking his pipe out of his mouth, “Is that correct?”

My breast pounded. Why was he asking that? Somehow I nodded.

“How much do you want for it?”

“It is not for sale,” I stammered after a long silence.

“Not for sale? What do you mean? Listen. My daughter Tuktuk has taken a fancy to the horse. She wants to ride it. She has wanted your horse ever since she saw it.”

There is not a single man in our village who dares flout the Raja. I do not know where I found the courage to reply, “It's only a foal,” I said gently, “Not even two years old. How can it carry the princess on its back?”

“That’s no business of yours,” the Raja bit down hard on the nozzle of the hubble-bubble pipe, he had put in between his teeth again, “It’s a horse and will be big enough some day.”

“It’s late today,” he went on, taking the nozzle out of his mouth, “Bring the horse tomorrow morning on your way to work and collect fifty rupees from the treasurer for it. I’m giving you a good price.”

The Raja rose to his feet, I threw myself down before him, pleading, “Please don’t take the horse away from me, I cannot live without it.”

“Why not? Does your horse lay golden eggs? Let go off my legs.” The Raja turned and stamped away.

At that time the mistress of the house, our Rani entered with a bowl of milk.

“What’s the matter, Biju?” She asked when she saw me.

I burst into tears, saying through my sobs, “The Raja is taking away my horse tomorrow morning.”

The Rani’s eyes widened. She looked like the goddess Durga. “Why should you give it if you don’t want to part with it?” she said, I’ll speak to him about it.”

“If the Raja doesn’t listen to you?”

“He can’t take your horse by force. Why should he want the horse you do not wish to sell?”

The princess put down the bowl of milk her mother has given her. She said, “Yea mother, I want the pony. I want to ride it. How lovely white it is! It’s so pretty!”

“You have palaces,” Now I said to Tuktuk directly, “beautiful palaces, even stable full of horses, so many of them! Big gardens! Beautiful clothes!

Toys! Jewels! Have I ever asked for any of them? Then why do you want my pony?” I stopped to take a breath before going on.

“I’ll bring you all sorts of things if you let my pony go. Lotuses as white as my horse, from the lake, beautiful blue birds from the forests – and lots of things.”

Hearing me the princess started thinking silently.

I was full of anxiety for Shadapal. He had never gone without food before for so long a time. I had not given him his grass and water, and he had never been away from me for so long either. His whinnying was in my ears.

“Very well,” Tuktuk said as I was revolving these thoughts in my mind, “I won’t take your horse if you marry me. You’ll set me on it yourself and let me ride it every day.”

My heart thrilled though the tears had not dried on my face. Shadapal also would be as pleased as I would be if this lovely little princess becomes my bride. I imagined her on Shadapal’s back, riding through the green fields, galloping away to the far blue sky. But how could it be? Tuktuk is daughter of a Raja, lived in palaces, the darling of a royal household, while I am a humble cowherd of that house, who spends day in the pasture looking after cattle. The Rani noticed how engrossed I had become with the idea. With a smiling face she said, “Biju, the mention of marriage has upset you. Grow up. Become a man, a man of worth. You’ll find a bride of your liking when you are.”

“And you too, my dear,” she said to her daughter, “must grow up before you begin thinking of a husband. Now go and do your lessons. It’s really late.”

The Rani rose. I bowed reverently to her and turned to the door.

The Raja entered at that moment.

“I’ve thought of a name for the horse,” he said when he saw me, “Bring it tomorrow morning.”

I left the village with Shadapal the next morning, while it was still dark, the village birds still asleep, and nobody was awake except the stars in the sky.

When dawn came and the sky filled with colour, I was standing on the landing of lake and Shadapal, tired from our night journey, was drinking water. Buds of light were opening on the water. A bird or two had begun to call. He had scarcely touched the water and I was watching his reflection in the lake when a shout behind me made me turn. The Raja's men, armed with spears, were standing there. One of them struck the ground with the butt of his spear and cried, "Oh you cowherd, you! It's easier to get away from Yama, the Lord of Death, than the Raja of Mallikpur." He plunged down the steps of the landing, seized me and tied my arms behind my back. The others surrounded Shadapal and bound him with such heavy ropes that blood seemed to be about to break from the bruises.

They proceeded to lead us away towards the village, marching in front and behind with raised spears. I was as tightly tied up as Shadapal.

The day was breaking bright. Birds were singing, the dew had dried and light was sparkling all around us. Through gaps in the trees light rays flashed off the spears like arrows. One of the armed men, after we had gone some distance, said, "The Raja's orders were to bring in the horse. Why drag this simpleton along? Off with you, cowherd that you are! Go!"

He struck me on the back of the neck as he spoke. I fell among thorn bushes. My arms were still bound. Pain and humiliation overcame me. My eyes filled with tears, I raised my arms to the heavens and cried out, "Sky, be my witness! Dawn breeze, be my witness! The Raja has taken Shadapal away from me for no fault of mine. He, the Raja of Mallikpur, has taken away my livelihood and deprived me of my house. He has insulted and humiliated me. He has abused my beloved Shadapal. Dawn sky and breeze, hear me! Have I ever been the cause of trouble to anyone in the village? Have I hurt my father in any way or caused my mother pain? Hear me! When I left our house in the village there were twelve rings on the

areca palm in the courtyard. I shall roll the Raja in the dust of the road before the rings number sixteen."

The vow was made.

Spears flashed around Shadapal as they led him away. Shadapal was roped so tightly, he could hardly turn his head but he looked back once and I understand his agony.

I tore the ropes that bound my arms with my teeth. Freed, I stood up although my feet were bleeding. I walked all day until I found an empty hut at the edge of a village in the evening. I climbed up on the stoop and lay down. I was thirsty and hungry. As I lay there I thought of my mother, of my village, of Shadapal, of the future and wondering what was in store for me. I fell asleep.

Shadapal was neighing. I woke up. It was night and I was surrounded by darkness. The sky was full of stars. Shadapal's neighing was far away. I turned me ear to the wind and listened. The wind changed direction now and then and I could not hear Shadapal.

But I heard him again when the wind veered back. Suddenly the sound of hooves became audible where I sat. The sound of hooves became continuous and I heard the neighing clearly. It grew louder and stopped right in front of me. Jumping down from the stoop I threw my arms around Shadapal's neck. He had been bridled. Reins of highly polished leather hung from his head. There was a brass ring on them.

"Good for you, Shadapal!" I cried, giving him a congratulatory pat on the shoulder. "The Raja could not hold you with his reins. Did they give you your grass and water?"

Shadapal raised his eyes and looked at me. The moon in the sky hung there like a curved coconut slice. I understood the horse has not had anything to eat that day. I ran my hand over his forehead caressingly again and again.

Shadapal is usually very quiet when I patter his head, but that day he kept whinnying, rubbing his face against me. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

By way of answer Shadapal came closer, brushed against me and I realized he was trying to tell me to mount him. I had never ridden him before and I was wondering whether I should do so then when I realized he was trying to tell me the Raja’s men were following him. No sooner was I seated on his back than Shadapal straightened up, tautened and flew like an arrow into the darkness.

The sun was well up in the eastern sky when we came to a village the next morning. The village was enclosed on three sides by rivers. I dismounted by the shore of one, cut grass, washed it in the river water and fed Shadapal. I brought him drinking water in my cupped hands. Women and children were standing in the knee deep water along the shore catching fish with small nets. I noticed there were all very thin. One of them, a shaky little old woman, was catching fish with here bare hands. She caked up to me and stared into my face for a long time before speaking. Then, with a half-closed eye, she asked, “Where do you come from, boy?”

“A long way from here,” I answered, “Three month away if one walks.”

“No, boy,” who knew what the old woman understood, You aren’t telling the truth. The country you’ve come from is God’s own. Where else are eyes like the dawn sky to be found? And I have never seen a horse as white as a cloud before although I am an old woman.”

The other women and children catching fish came up and together they led me into their village. In the courtyard of one of the houses they sprinkled water on the ground, swept it and spread a mat for me to sit upon. Two girls came forward with palm leaf fans. Others cut green coconuts. Shadapal and I drank the sweet milk. After we had eaten, the old woman spoke, saying, “God has sent you to us, boy. Save us. Come to the rescue of this village’s children.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Boy,” the old woman said, “It hasn’t been like this long. Our pastures were full of cows only a few years ago. Our fields were ploughed by young men who were strong and able, calling ‘het! Het!’ drove them down the furrows. Grain grew down in the riverbanks. There were huskers in every house and women pounded the grain, flattened and puffed it over slow fires. The autumn harvest festival was celebrated with the rice cakes on the Navanna Day. Barns filled with the new crop. Crows, attracted by the plenty flocked in from distant places. Then suddenly, no one knows why, the cattle began to die. Those that survived were too weak to keep on their feet and lay around listlessly until they too died.”

“There was no milk in the village. Not a drop. Worst of all, ploughing stopped. Not a single grain of rice grew in the fields. The very look of rice was apparently forgotten. How can young men live without the produce of the land? Many of them left the village for faraway places and those who stayed became more skin and bone. What can I do, boy? I come with the women and children to catch fish in the river. I am old. How long can we exist on fish we catch this way and the green coconut milk and the roots and leaves we gather in the jungle? Our hands and feet are sodden and swollen with standing so much of our time in the water. The village ojha or medicine man, fakirs, and medical men have tried all sorts of remedies without effect. We have made votive, offerings to the village deities, vowed to make sacrificial offerings. Not a cow gave milk or a young man put on his feet. Do something, boy. You know the answer. It is in your eyes.”

“Old mother,” I said when I had heard her story, “I’ll do what I can to help you. Your plight distresses me but I do not have any ready solution. It is not as you think. Show mw the sick people and sick animals.”

The old woman led me from house to house and I looked first at the people lying inertly on their beds, wrapped in quilts and blankets. Then we went to the cowsheds. Having tended cattle throughout my childhood I knew something about their ailments and how to cure them with medicine made from wild roots and plants.

I spent the whole of the next day in the woodland, collecting herbs, going from place to place with Shadapal. In the afternoon I brought them back, washed them in river water and smashed them into a juicy paste. Then strained the juice and fed it to the cows. Every evening I gave the cows this mixture and in the early morning went in the cowsheds to see what effect the medicine was having, changing the mixture according to the condition of the animals.

Then one morning I was awakened by the sound of lowing. The lowing had attracted the women and children. They had run out of their houses and were making merry. Cows that had barren calved and gave milk. The weak and sickly bulls gradually recovered their strength. They stood up and went back to the fields, beginning to plough and sow again. Again grain grew down to the banks of the rivers, barns filled and women husked. The aroma of new rice attracted birds from distant places at the time of the harvest festival and rice cakes were plentiful at the Navanna.

“Friend,” the strong young men of the village said to me,” “You have restored life to us and to the village. It is green once more. You have been a god to us. You are our Raja. We are prepared to give our lives for you.”

“I am no God,” I answered, “I am your friend. But hear my story. The Raja of my country has driven me from home and my village and made Shadapal suffer a lot. I had vowed to roll the Raja in the dust. If you are willing to help me I shall never forget your kindness.”

“We will help you,” they chorused, raising their fists heavenward, “Rely on us. Let’s go!”

I raised my arms and quieted them down, saying, “Raja Mallik’s men do not fight barehanded. They have weapons. What will we fight them with?”

“We want weapons,” the men shouted their reply.

“My friends,” I said, “Keep cool. We must do one clear-headed thinking. Where can we get weapons? The date of our confrontation with the Raja can be decided when we have got them.”

I begged my friends to think of ways to get weapons but could think of none myself. Days passed. Nights passed. Winter passed. The northern sky over the village reddened with the simul blossoms of spring. I was obsessed with a single thought. How were we to get weapons? I could think of nothing else and the spring had no effect on me. I went about plunged in thought day and night and dreamt that Shadapal was kicking the sides of his stall. I began to wonder whether I would be able to keep my vow.

Then one night the little old woman groped her way to me through the darkness and said, “I know what’s worrying you, boy, and I know how to do away with your worry. I haven’t told you before because you would have set out at once and run into trouble. I don’t want you to leave the village but the way you are worrying is wearing you down. I can tell you where weapons can be found. Come with me, but be careful not to wake anybody.”

The old woman led me down to the river, walking silently. She cast a wary glance back at the village and then, pointing a bony finger across the water to the opposite shore she whispered, “Listen. Can you hear a flute?”

At first I thought it was the whistling of the wind but when I listened more intently I realized it was the sound of a flute I was hearing. Some one across the river was playing a flute. A number of flutes were being played in unison.

“They play the flute all night,” the old woman whispered, “And their arrows fly as far as the flutes can be heard. Once, when I was a child standing at this very spot, one of their arrows came across. My grandfather was terribly frightened. The elders in our village said the people across the river were annoyed with us for some reason. A great yajna went on for a whole month. All the milk available in the village was boiled down to make ghee. The yajna was performed in such a way that it could be seen from the other

shore. The aroma of the butter wafted over to them with the smoke of the fires. No child in the village got a drop of milk that month. I heard from my grandmother that the people across the river are the best archers in the world. Better bows and arrows than theirs are not to be found anywhere. They make their bows by twisting the hanging roots of ancient banyans with the guts of wild boars and drying them in the sun. Your problem will be solved if you get some of their bows and arrows. You can revenge yourself on your Raja for the wrong he has done you. But mind you, boy, the people over there kill every stranger that ventures into their country. No one has ever returned from there.”

I set out across the river that very night, after hearing what the old woman said, taking Shadapal with me on a raft I made out of bamboos. It took us seven days and seven nights. We landed on a sandy beach. There was no sign of any habitation. Crabs the size of turtles were the only living things we could see. Beyond the beach was woodland that seemed extensive. My attention was drawn to it again and again. We turned our backs to the river and rode towards the trees. Our way was blocked by a flight of arrows. They fell in front of us in a line, fencing off our path. I pulled Shadapal back, turned and took another path into the trees. We had not gone far when a second flight of arrows blocked our path again.

“Jump over. Can’t you?” I whispered to Shadapal.

I straightened, pulled on the reins and Shadapal took the fence of arrows at a gallop, landing on the other side. Darting deeper into the woods, suddenly Shadapal snorted loudly and neighed and stood still on his hind legs for a second, then plunged face down on the ground, tossing in pain. A large arrow had hit him at the base of his neck and blood was spurting from it. I groaned. I have seen not a little suffering but Shadapal’s plight rent my heart. Blood was soaking into the ground. There were tears in his eyes. Not knowing what to do I took hold of the arrow and pulled it out of his neck, throwing my arms around him. Was I going to lose Shadapal?

The sound of dry leaves rustling under trampling feet made me look up. Huge fierce-looking men were approaching me. There were hundreds of

them. They were all carrying large bows and arrows. They put the bows and arrows on the ground in front of me and laid themselves face down in an attitude of extreme veneration. The one of them rose, came forward, picked up the arrow that had injured Shadapal and drew a line around the place on the ground stained with his blood. Another among them rubbed some herbs in his palms and applied its juice in Shadapal’s wounds. The flow of blood from his wound ceased at once. Shadapal’s pain eased and stopped thrashing about. When the man saw that he was quiet they began to bring food offerings and placed them before him. This person was wearing a crown of white conch shell, shell armlets, a necklace of coloured stones and a girdle of crab shells.

“Who are you, stranger?” he asked, addressing me, “Where have you come from?”

I realized he was the country’s chieftain. He was wearing a crown.

“I have come from very faraway,” I replied, “and I am only a very humble cowherd.” I bowed before him.

“Hear me,” the chieftain said, “According to an ancient custom of this country, any stranger who sets foot in it is instantly killed. Strangers are attracted to this country out of greed. They come to plunder. Not one had ever got away with his life. The only reason you have not yet been killed is this horse. The deity we worship is a white horse. If our arrows so much as stir the air around it disaster is sure to follow. Our men blocked your way instead of killing you least the horse be injured. They refrained from killing you although you are a stranger. We planned to do it when you dismounted. But the horse surmounted the blockade of arrows by jumping over it with you on his back. We took careful aim. Our arrows never miss. But the horse took the arrow in his chest, with a clever move and saved your life. A white horse has saved you. You cannot be an enemy. You have not come here out of greed, to plunder. You are a friend. I wish to reward you. Friend, stranger, tell me what you want. We will give you whatever you seek as penance for the shedding of a white horse’s blood.

“Your Majesty,” I said, bowing to him again, “I am only a cowherd. Shadapal is my closest friend and my days pass very pleasantly in his

company. We take the royal cattle to pasture and watch the changing seasons.”

“The Raja of my country coveted Shadapal and tried to take him away from me. He offered me money for him. He sent men to carry out his orders. They insulted and abused me. They hurt Shadapal. I took Shadapal and left the country, vowing to roll the Raja in the dust as my revenge for his treatment of me. If you really wish to give me something, Raja, lend me a few of your bows and arrows. I want nothing else.”

“Take a hundred bows and lots of arrows!” the chieftain said, “Ask for something more. You are a hero.”

“Maharaj,” I said, overcome with gratitude, “I shall never forget your generosity. I want nothing more.”

“We are pleased to have you as our friend, for you are not covetous. Let us to the palace. I wish to bestow on you a very precious gift.”

The Raja proceeded to the palace, taking both Shadapal and myself with him. We were followed by a procession of hundreds of people.

The beauty of the vast palace, built of carved wood, amazed me. I had not dreamt that such a splendid building could be made out of wood.

Honey of many kinds was served to us in exquisite wooden bowls and the cream of buffalo milk in shell pitchers. Then the flutes began to play and kept playing the whole night through. Flutes that are wonder! It seemed to speak, telling the pleasures and griefs of the people, their dreams, their hopes. My heart thrilled as I listened.

The next morning the chieftain came down to the riverbank to see me. Putting Shadapal on a wide raft and laying the bows and arrows down beside him I bowed to the chieftain a last time and expressed my gratitude.

“Friend,” said the Raja, “Accept this flute as a present from me. When you put your lips to this flute its melodies will sing of all that is dear to you, your hopes and dreams, sorrows and joys. You will be victorious.”

The eastern sky was glowing, light was on the shore and the water was sparkling. As long I could see him the chieftain stood on the sands enveloped in the radiance of the new day.

Day after day I plied the oars and we at last arrived at the little old woman’s village. Her wizened face filled with smiles when she saw me and the strong young men began to prepare for war.

Several days were passed in feasting on fish from the river, fine rice from the rice fields, coconut milk and the sweet milk of black cows, and we played games, accustoming ourselves to the use of the bows and arrows. Then, when we were ready we set out together for my country.

The sight of my home fields, village houses and the lake after so long made my heart dance with joy. Even the palm blackened by a thunderbolt delighted me. A woodpecker was tapping at its trunk as usual.

We proceeded straight to the Eastern side of the village and lined up in front of the palace. I was in front, seated on Shadapal. Lifting my face heavenward I called out in a loud voice :

“I, Biju the cowherd, have returned. Where is the Raja? He must take his punishment for his injustice and arrogance.”

“Where is the Raja?”

The palace guards seized their spears and came running out at the threat of trouble but their shouts died away and the spears were arrested in midair when they saw the hundreds of armed men facing them, with the great curved bows and arrows at the ready.

“I, Biju the cowherd, have come,” I cried, “Where is the Raja?”

Mallik Raja, gigantic lance in hand, emerged from the palace in person. An arrow from one of my men grazed his chest. The Raja flung himself down on the ground. I rode up to him on Shadapal, dismounted and raised him from the dust.

“Raja,” I said, “My vow is fulfilled. On the day you sent your men to take Shadapal away from me I vowed to roll you in the dust. Today my vow has been fulfilled. Pardon my pitilessness. I am only your humble cowherd.”

“I am the one to be forgiven,” the Raja said when he heard my words, drawing me to him, “You have opened my eyes. How blind I have been!”

“Throw down your spears,” the Raja said, turning to his guards, “Throw open the royal Guest House. Make it known that Biju is the guest of the village with all his men. Biju has come home. Milk the cows, net the fish, gather fruits from the trees, let us celebrate the return of our Biju.”

The Mallik Raja, after seeing my friends comfortably installed in the royal Guest House, took me upstairs, leading the way to the inner apartments. The conch was blown as we entered and women raised their welcoming voices.

The Rani summoned me to her and said, “Biju, child, you are a man now and a man of worth. Into your care I am giving our beloved Tuktuk, jewel of our eyes. Place her beside you on your white horse so that she may ride with you!”

Tuktuk was standing beside the Rani. She blushed like a rose. The jewel in the parting of her hair sparkled. She was radiant in her lovely Benarasi sari.

“Are you happy now, Tuktuk?” her mother asked.

Tuktuk nodded, murmuring her assent, the jewel of his forehead moving as she did so.

Then one day we were married to the music of the sanai. And everyday I set Tuktuk behind on Shadapal and we rode out into the countryside. Some

days, why I do not know, I would feel sad even in the morning. At such times I would ride off to a secluded spot and play my flute standing under the open sky.