

The Gift of the Forest

A Tamil Story by Bindu Chander

Venu had spent the day with his mother at the busy bazaar in Kodaikanal town selling their crops of fresh cauliflower, cabbage, garlic and onions. As they wearily made their way back to their village, Venu played his flute. He carried this flute everywhere and played exquisite music which always made his mother happy.

On entering their farmhouse in Vilpatti, Venu sat on a stool next to the bed where his father was resting. 'Tantai,' said the boy, 'please eat some more rice. It does not look like you have eaten at all today and the doctor said you need to try and keep eating regularly so that you might keep up your strength.'

The old man looked lovingly at his son. 'Venu, my sweet boy, the doctor says all sorts of things, but the truth is my health is getting no better. If only I had not worked in that mining factory for all those years I am sure my health would not be so bad. Poor Adhir's wife has received no compensation from the company after losing her husband and he worked so hard. What does the company do? They just brush it aside under the carpet as if nothing happened. They are getting away with murder!'

Venu was always upset whenever his father spoke of his illness. 'Tantai, please don't talk like that, it makes me sad. I love you, Tantai!'

'I love you too, my boy, but there is no future for you here.' It was then that the old man's face took on a very serious expression. 'That is why you must leave this place. I do not want you ever working in the mining factory. Not ever!'

'But I don't want to leave, Tantai. I love the forest and have many friends here. I don't want to leave.'

The boy was very upset at his father's words and he began to cry, but the old man, despite his sickness and his frailty, remained stern. He said:

'How many times have we discussed this, Venu? There is no cure that can rid my body of the damage done by the mercury pollution. No cure for me or for

my fellow workers. These companies have no shame: coming to our beautiful land and taking over, destroying nature just for money. They do not care about the beautiful trees or the animals who make their home deep within the forest.'

'But I care!' said Venu as he jumped to his feet and stormed out of the house. His father knew where the boy was going: to his favourite place, his beloved forest.

Venu had always loved the forest, ever since he could remember. It enchanted him, made him feel alive, safe and loved. He felt a freedom within the forest that he did not feel in any other place in the whole wide world. And he loved to play his flute there, alone with the wildlife and the music.

Deep within the forest, the blue and purple flowers of the Kurinji were in bloom. 'How majestic,' thought Venu as he admired the colourful plants spread here and there between the big cypress, eucalyptus and acacia trees.

Venu's favourite gifts of the forest were the wonderful fruits which he could pick off of the trees and eat. He spotted a tree with peaches on it and picked himself a plump, juicy specimen that he knew instinctively would be ripe. He bit into the red and orange flesh and the rich juice oozed out and ran down his cheeks.

How he delighted in this simple pleasure, sitting in his forest eating his peach while watching the nilgiri monkeys up above chasing each other from branch to branch. Venu also admired a beautiful flock of Red-Whiskered BulBul birds that flew towards him out of the blue sky above. Then he saw Laila the baby elephant approaching. He had been witness to her birth the previous year and they had been close friends ever since.

Venu walked up to Laila and offered her the remaining half of his luscious peach which she accepted in one mouthful. The boy looked at his friend, his heart full of sorrow. 'My father has plans for me to leave Kodaikanal, to leave my forest, but I don't want to go! This is my home.'

Once these words had left Venu's lips, the young boy began to cry. Laila looked up at the boy and said:

‘Venu, my mother and father are both dead after drinking from the lake where the factory dumps its mercury waste. It is not safe here anymore. They have spoiled our paradise and they are not stopping. You must leave, Venu. I do not want you to fall ill! When you arrive in your new home, tell them what is happening to our forest. Tell them that the forest needs help. Tell them that the factory and the mines must go!’

Venu wiped the tears from his eyes. ‘You are right, Laila. That is exactly what I am going to do. I will let people know what is happening here.’

As the sun slowly fell from the sky, the two friends sat side by side in silence and took in the variety of sounds, textures and colours of their beloved forest. Eventually Venu got to his feet and brushed himself down. He felt much better for being in the forest but it was time to get home.

‘Laila, I must leave now. Dusk is falling and I ran out of home in a real huff. Tāy and Tantai are probably worried sick.’

The little elephant smiled at the young boy. ‘Ok, Venu,’ she said, ‘you go home. And thank you for caring.’

‘Thank you for being my friend,’ said the boy. And with these words they parted company.

Venu got back to his house and saw a star in the night sky. It was all alone, but it was so bright and it twinkled silver and white in the night sky. Venu stopped to admire this sight until his thoughts were interrupted by his father’s voice.

‘Venu, come here, my son.’

The boy approached his father and gave him a big hug. The old man was very grateful to have such a loving son. He said:

‘Your mother and I are not angry with you. We do not want you to leave. We just want what is best for you. A very generous friend in London has offered you a place in his home and he will support your schooling there. You will be leaving next week. I am sorry, my son. I cannot work anymore so we cannot afford to keep you with us.’

Venu put on his bravest face but was unable to stop the tears. 'Yes, Tantai,' he said in a quiet voice, 'I understand that you love me and want what is best for me so I will go to London.'

Venu held his father as tightly as he could because he did not know when he would see him again. The young boy was also very nervous because he knew nothing of London or of Britain. But he carried a glimmer of hope in his heart; He hoped that one day he would return to the forest, that he would come back and see the tall trees and the monkeys. He would see Laila and together they would watch the kunjiri flower bloom once again.

Venu was deeply unhappy about leaving his parents, but the forest needed him to stop the factory so he braved the shock of landing in a foreign land with the most courageous face he could muster.

He was met at the airport by his father's friend who was known to him simply as Balu. Balu was a large man with a jolly disposition. His favourite pastime was singing along to Tamil songs whilst he prepared his meals. Balu wanted to make the boy feel at home so he had prepared a large array of dishes for Venu's first meal in London.

Tamil songs played on the radio in the background as the two of them ate together that first evening. Venu shared with Balu what was happening in the forest back home, how the gifts of the forests were being destroyed, polluted by the mercury from the mining factory. 'I am saddened to hear of what is happening to our beloved forest,' said Balu.

'I need to tell people about what is happening back home so that they might help us,' said Venu, 'but all I can do is play my flute. I do not know what else I can do.'

The man and boy sat in silence over their dinner. They enjoyed the music on the radio but neither of them had a very good appetite. Then, quite suddenly, Balu shot up out of his seat with a look of excitement etched on his face.

'That's it!' he exclaimed.

'What is it?' asked Venu

'We will make a song about the forest and we will put it on the internet. We will get people to sign a petition to stop the factories and the pollution!'

'How will we put a song on the internet? I have never done that.'

'It's easy,' said Balu. 'You have the talent. Your father has told me many times about your beautiful flute playing. And me... well, I have the technology. Ha, ha! I love doing stuff like this, making up Tanglish songs. This is going to be fun, I can feel it.'

'What is Tanglish?' asked Venu.

'It is when the words of a song are a mixture of Tamil and English... Pretty cool hey?' said Balu, chuckling to himself as though he had just found a secret key. 'Come on, let's do it now. We've had a lovely meal and I feel good. I've got all my equipment set up in the living room already. You *have* got your flute haven't you, Venu?'

The young boy was very excited by Balu's idea, but he was also a little bit nervous as he had never recorded his music before. He said:

'I take my flute everywhere, but I am not sure about playing and recording. So many people might listen if we put it on the internet.'

'That is the whole point, my boy! And you are not just going to play,' said Balu with a big, mischievous smile. 'We are both going to sing too, you and I. We shall sing about the beautiful forest and how the factories are destroying our lands. Come on, let's get started.'

And so Balu and Venu spent the whole night recording music and thinking up lyrics that would capture what Venu wanted to say about the forest and all of its natural beauty and wonder. And most importantly of all, Venu wanted to tell people how the factories were causing damage to his beloved forest and how they should be made to stop.

All night long the duo worked on their song about the forest. They wrote and recorded the lyrics that would fit nicely alongside Venu's flute playing and some very strange and wonderful sounds that Balu created on his computer.

All night long they worked, right up until the young boy was so tired that he dragged himself to bed and fell asleep instantly.

‘Good Morning, Venu,’ said a cheery Balu as the young boy walked into the kitchen the following day. ‘Did you sleep well? Was the duvet warm enough for you? Britain can be very cold at times.’

Venu took a seat at the table as Balu prepared a breakfast of paratha and sweet chai.

‘I’ve got a surprise for you,’ he said.

‘What is it?’ asked Venu, still half asleep.

‘Well, after we finished creating our song last night, I uploaded it onto the internet. I was just too excited and wanted to share it with everybody as soon as possible. You’re not angry with me are you, Venu?’

‘Not at all. It *was* finished and it is *our* song. It belongs to us both.’

‘Good, good,’ said Balu, now barely able to contain his excitement, ‘because guess what? We’ve already had over three million people listen to it so far! Three million!’

‘What!’ said Venu, his mouth full of paratha.

‘It’s gone viral! Unbelievable! And there are emails from people who are asking about the petition. An environmental charity wants to talk to you as soon as possible. They want to stop the mercury pollution from further damaging the forest, and they say they have the power to do this. Can you believe it?’

‘Venu could barely believe his ears. ‘Let’s call them!’ he said, as excited as Balu. ‘I’m ready to talk to them right now!’ He jumped out of his chair and hugged his friend. ‘Without your help none of this would have been possible. Thank you Balu.’

‘I just want you and all children to experience the gifts of our forest. No company has the right to destroy such a beautiful place. Come on; let’s call the environmental charity who are going to help us.’

Balu dialled the number and Venu spoke to the serious sounding gentleman who answered the phone. The man explained how many of the people who worked for the charity had listened to the song on the internet and how they were all very impressed. Venu told the man about the factories and how his father was sick, and how Laila's mother and father had died after drinking from the contaminated lake.

The man from the environmental charity promised Venu that the factories would be made to stop. 'It will not be easy,' he said. 'It will be a long fight. But we will make sure they leave the forest in the end. And we shall make them pay compensation to the workers.'

When Venu put down the phone he was as happy as he had ever been. He and Balu had begun the process of saving the forest. Venu realised that one person could make a difference if they really cared, and he promised himself that he would never forget this lesson. 'And one day soon,' he thought, 'I will return home to my family and to Laila and the kurinji flowers, and all of the beautiful gifts of the forest.'