

## **LARA : THE BLACK PEARL**

- Ike

She came home in a Neuro Surgeon's apron pocket on 9 November 2002. Dr. Uma Nambiar, the Onco-Neuro Surgeon at Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute & Research Centre, New Delhi gifted her to us. Uma had already given her a name- "Lara". We never asked Uma, why she chose Lara. May be, Uma was a great fan of Brian Lara, the world's best cricketer (but knowing Uma, I knew she didn't know the difference between cricket, the game and cricket, the insect) or Lara Dutta, the most beautiful woman of the year - Miss India. She was a gift for Uma from one of her patients. For us, she was the most beautiful pet. A velvet black Labrador born of Angel & Snoopy on 13 October 2002. Lara was a little bundle of joy, just one month old; jet black velvet hair with sparkling, beautiful eyes. The moment she arrived, the other two inmates, Fluffy and Ruffles, did not take it too kindly, for having to share their space in our hearts. But having found someone smaller than they, they were magnanimous, I must say. Yet, they kept a little distance. Lara wouldn't leave her new mom's lap. The new mom, my better half Vickey, would not keep her down. We made a nice little crib and that was to be Lara's bed for a month. The crib was always next to Vickey's bed. We were not allowed to even speak loud, while she was asleep, lest we wake her up.

A month passed without much of ado; Uma came again with yet another pup on 8 December, this time with Lara's brother. He had no name. I chose Zeeno for his name. Zeeno had a story. The family which kept Lara - Zeeno had a tragedy in their home. One night, when Zeeno's owner, the lady of the house, took Zeeno's mom, Angel out for her call, she spotted two strangers hiding in their garden. She raised an alarm. Her husband came out and in the fight that ensued, the robbers fired at her husband and escaped into the darkness. The man died later in a hospital.

Were these dogs a bad omen? They believed so. They wanted to get rid off the bad omen. Superstitious as most people are, nobody would take Zeeno. Uma, the bold woman she is, knew me by my DNA and was certain that I will be only too happy to explode a myth.

There they were: Lara and Zeeno, the brother-sister duo. Resembling identical twins, we had difficulty identifying who is what. But, sure enough, they knew who is who! My God! There was no end to their pranks. They had a weakness for blankets and could crawl into it without drawing the slightest attention. God knows from where they learnt the art. They had the best of the Vet care. Registered with KCI, medical history cards made and training under strict supervision of Vickey.

They picked up the training well. They even learnt mathematics, geometry to be precise. They learnt that the shortest route from one side of the double bed to the other side was walking over the bed; pillow was the easiest thing to chew and tear; one shoe from each pair could be hidden in places not easily noticeable; the new pair of shoes is the best to chew on; Newspaper, magazines and books are meant to be chewed, shredded and not read; Mamma's kitchen was the best restaurant in town; my garden and the flower beds were the best place for playing "Roll on grass"; cupboards were the best for "Hide and seek"; Sofa's were the best to cuddle up during daytime, Animal Planet on TV has dogs which do not bark at them - the list is endless.

They assumed that answering the door bell was their privilege and opened doors were meant for running out, irrespective of who the caller was. Every opening

of the door led to a steeple chase for their mamma (to retrieve them). No doubt, it gave sufficient exercise to Vickey. They learnt pretty soon that their mom is a poor decision-maker, if they run in opposite directions which resulted in more outing-time for at least one of them. God knows whether they had a secret agreement to take turns for the longer outing. Everything seemed going well in the family, four pets, one Mom and one Dad.

In six months they were full grown. They would carry their plates when called for food. But, they never learnt to wash their own plates after the meal. After all, what does Mamma do the whole day? They soon became a handful. Lara was more intelligent. Zeeno was little dumb and a slow learner, like all males. While playing "Fetch", Lara would be off the starter block in a jiffy and fetch the ball; but Zeeno would still be gaping at the out-stretched hand, thinking that the ball is still in the hand.

When she was eighteen months old, the symptoms started appearing. Lara would often fall sick. She started showing signs of lack of appetite, loose bowels, depression, seizure, falling hair etc. The Vet diagnosed her with ailments of probable inbreeding. But I suspected it to be Infectious canine hepatitis (ICH). Despite all the timely vaccinations, how could she be infected? May be all the medicines, bought over the counter, were fake! When human beings are treated with spurious medicines, who cares for these less fortunate beings? She was treated with all sorts of medicines and hormones- She stopped barking, started a kind of stuttering every now and then and used to froth in her mouth.

We knew there was something fatally wrong with her. The Vets gave up. But Vickey's love and affection kept her alive and reasonably active. I was transferred to Doda to fight the militants and Vickey too had to go to Shillong to take care of her ailing mother for a month. But Lara was still under the constant care of the Vet and Pancham Lal, my buddy, who was as much caring as we were. We separated Zeeno and Ruffles, lest her ailment was contagious. Yet, she braved it all. She became weaker and weaker with no appetite. At times, she would stumble and fall and could not get up. We knew, we would lose her despite the best care we could give, sooner or later. Though we could see death in her beautiful eyes, her eyes would always show us a ray of hope, may be pleading with us to let her die without suffering. Her last few days, she could neither get up nor drink anything. Vickey spoon-fed her for a month.

It was 23 December 2004. Around 10 PM, you won't believe, 15 minutes before she died, she actually struggled to her feet and wobbled out of the house on to the backyard. She had never done that before. May be, she didn't want to burden us with carrying her dead body. I carried her back into the house. She kept her eyes wide open looking into our eyes. Vickey was crying seeing her plight. Lara was seeing her Mom for one last time. She tried to bark once. But no sound emerged. Then she closed her eyes for ever, never to open again. One last heave of lungs and then..... the end! The story ended! She looked majestic and at peace in death. We could not see our LARA lying motionless, sans her never-say-die spirit to live.

Past midnight, I shoveled a 3- feet deep pit in our backyard, said a small prayer and lowered Lara to her final resting place. A wintry night it was, and we covered her with one of her favourite blankets, lest she feel lonely and cold. The garden soil covered our Lara. A concrete slab moved over it. Our tears had dried up. Lara had become immortal. Did we see a bright star on a Christmas night sky over Delhi? We believe so.

Are we to be superstitious? No way! Lara came into this world with a purpose, accomplished it, better than the best and joined the stars. After all, she was the daughter of an Angel on a short-term loan to us lesser mortals!

Lara had the courage to fight the odds, but could anyone stop the destiny; the inevitable. Adieu Lara! You taught us a lesson or two even in your death. You will always remain in our hearts, as the smartest of all among the canine kind, we ever possessed. You will always remain our Lara Baby.....

24 December 2004.