

## The Calf Story

I have to tell the story of a calf, and if anyone thinks they'll hear some profound wisdom, it's better to stop reading right now and mind your business. I'm telling the story so I can later write something and win a bet with our teacher, Eka. Eka teaches us Georgian; she's our class coach teacher, and on the last day of school, she gave us a homework: to write about our summer adventures.

The moment she said this, I knew I wasn't going to write anything at all. I don't know how she guessed it, but as we were leaving the classroom, she said, "Luka, stay for a moment." Then she said, "Well, I count on you to perfectly write my assignment, right?" I answered: "I'm not entirely confident, but I'll try." I was shy to refuse outright. She continued, "In this case you need a different assignment."  
"Another assignment?! No, teach... I'll do it like everyone else."

Then she said, "Will you mind us to make a bet? If you don't write it, you'll never skip a class and you'll come prepared every day. If you do write it, I won't skip classes and I'll prepare properly for the lessons." She laughed.

Eka is a wonderful person. She treats skipping class like treason and believes that if someone doesn't study, it's as if we're handing the country over to foreign invaders. I said, "Fine," because I never back down — and why start now?

So, I have to write something. What can I do? Let my enemies go to school every day and do class work! As for the adventures, just you wait,— I had a lot this summer. But honestly, the one that stayed with me the most was the story of the calf in the mountains.

It all began when Gaga called me, saying that Eka was looking for me. She was sending us to a European eco-camp.

"Europe?" I asked.

"No, just somewhere in the mountains nearby," he said. I asked why us and not others, and he explained, "Everyone is somewhere, but we're the only ones in the city."

"What's an Eka-camp?" I asked. "Is it her own camp?"

"Not Eka's, but eco-camp — ecological, you dumb..." he burst out laughing, then continued: "We'll have a great time, we'll go hiking, play soccer, and it's supposed to be an amazing place. It's hot here in the city, but up there it's cold — bring warm clothes!"

I was already intrigued. Soccer is fun, and I wondered how it could be cold in summer. I agreed to go. The next morning, I packed my backpack with sports clothes and shoes. Eka met us at school and greeted me: "It's great that you're coming too." She added, "Children, there will be an eco-camp here. You'll have fun at physics, math, and civics lessons, and also learn how to care for and save the Earth. So, go ahead — don't let your school down!" I nearly fainted. Lessons in this heat? Come on, fun and learning together in summer — no way. I whispered to Gaga, "Can we leave right now?" He said, "Let's see what it's like first. We're not going abroad. If we don't like it, we'll come back." So, we left.

It was right there that the story started — I mean, the story of the calf that I want to tell you. Eka wanted at least three pages. When the calf story was ending, the eco-camp started, so I have to tell the other parts too.

A lot of kids from different schools joined us. We left the city, first driving on the highway, then turned somewhere into the mountains. Mountains surrounded us, with villages clinging to them. We were so high that the clouds were below us, chasing us from the valleys but couldn't catch us. The view was breathtaking — I thought maybe this is what paradise looked like when Adam and Eve were there. But I am not writing about that, as this story isn't about paradise — it's about the calf.

Other kids from different schools joined us. We left the city, first on the highway, then turned somewhere into the mountains. Mountains surrounded us, with villages clinging to them. We were so high that the clouds were below us, chasing us from the valleys but couldn't catch us. The view was breathtaking — I thought maybe this is what paradise looked like when Adam and Eve were there. But I will not write about it, as this story isn't about paradise — it's about the calf.

Gaga was right, it seems — the clouds that were following us along the road caught us, and soon we were in mist. The minibus got so cold I thought it was winter. A girl named Saly sat near the window in a tank top, shivering like a sparrow perched on a snowy branch. I gave her a warm hoodie from my bag: "Here, put it on — it's brand new." She accepted willingly and looked at me gratefully. She told me her name — Saly — and I told mine.

Finally, the weather became warmer. The minibus stopped at a beautiful three-story building with, for some reason, a black roof. It appeared to be a hotel where we'd stay. That girl Saly was returning my hoodie; I refused: "Leave it with you, I have five more," I said. Who among us hasn't told at least one lie? But it was not quite a lie, was it? I had some other warm clothes. She said she would also give me something in return. She never took it off since then, to my mind.

The boys were assigned to the second floor and the girls to the third floor in separate rooms. Of course, I was with Gaga. First, we were told we'd have lunch, then a meeting. The food was all ecological, produced in nearby villages — so the eco-camp began.

Then, after lunch, we gathered in the hall. A young man introduced himself as our leader, Papuna, whom we could address about any problem. He explained the camp was about the Earth's problems, presentations, and learning how to save the planet. To save the Earth, we needed to know physics, math, and be good citizens, i.e. we would have lessons, but they would be fun — no grades. Then he introduced other teachers.

The physics teacher explained the state of the Earth with such emotion I nearly cried. He scolded humans so much that I doubted if he were a human being at all. I especially remembered the words: "Where there is a man, there's waste, and it is not only what we see along the roads. Waste is CO<sub>2</sub>, produced by burning fossil fuels, which is the main element of the warm gas that covers the Earth like a blanket. That's why global temperature rises, and in a way, it resembles a human: if the temperature of a person rises even by one degree, he gets sick. During two centuries, the temperature of the Earth has risen only by two degrees, causing fires, landslides, floods, and other disasters."

Gaga raised his hand. I knew he would say something ridiculous, but I couldn't stop him. So, this time was not an exception: "If the Earth has a fever, we should give it paracetamol!" At first, I thought we'd be sent home immediately. But the teacher said, "Good thinking! We're here to do something or at least to learn how to take care of the Earth."

Gaga was shining with pride. I thought he would not say hello to me for three days or sit next to me at dinner. The teacher continued: "Even turning off a kettle as soon as the water boils is helping the planet — less heat released into the environment."

Then a girl asked why our hotel roof was black; she didn't like it. The teacher smiled and said that he was going to explain that. As we might noticed there were no electric poles near the building, it generated its own energy via solar panels on its roof — no external wiring needed. In Tbilisi, I live on the top floor, and only water pours through the roof when it rains. How could the energy come down here, I thought, but I was shy to ask.

At first, we were inclined to run away from the camp, but then we got used to it. We were divided into teams for presentations about saving the Earth and stopping global warming. Saly's poster was memorable: the

Earth, sweating under the ice of the North Pole, showing +38°C. I suggested drawing Gaga giving the Earth paracetamol; Saly agreed, but Gaga refused, saying that there was not enough paint for him.

From the lessons, I learned how electricity comes from solar panels: photons in the rays hit the semiconducting panels on the roof, knocking electrons loose and creating energy. Expensive, but if every solar roof helps save the Earth, let it be expensive. Isn't it more costly when disasters strike?

Before getting to the calf, there were other lessons. The physics teacher showed Heron's fountain, a half-liter plastic "Bakhmaro" water bottle setup that sends water upward automatically. "Heron invented it in the 1st century B.C.," said the teacher. I asked, "Did ancient people produce 'Bakhmaro' bottled water then?" The teacher confirmed smiling, and everybody laughed.

Then we tested dropping a one-ton rock vs. a one-gram cotton ball, provided there is no air. One doesn't need physics for that, and I cried out: "A rock!" The physics teacher answered: "Aristotle also thought so, but Galileo proved otherwise." Then he took two equal plastic bottles: one filled with sand and one empty, and dropped them from the same height. They fell down simultaneously. I understood that Galileo didn't like Aristotle much. They could have even fought each other if not for the twenty centuries that separated them, so there was no fight. Instead, what Aristotle said, Galileo neglected. Didn't you know? A paper cup filled with water doesn't burn. Why do we need so much ironware at home? Let us make kettles and cups from paper... When I return home, I will ask Mom to fry potatoes in a paper pan. She will ask me if I have a high temperature and check my forehead. I say stupid things quite often — I have this talent.

Once, at the lesson we were studying the Moon and the textbook said only Americans managed to step on the Moon. I had an idea then: to use a rope when the Moon is turning around the Earth, and when it is down, to slide onto its surface with a rope, and when the Moon is over the Earth, slide down on the same rope. The teacher said it is possible — Baron Münchhausen did so. Then Gaga checked my temperature.

I have to tell you about Saly separately — not just because she promised me a gift and forgot about it, but because she participated in the calf story. "Participate" is not a correct word; she was a main character after the calf, of course. Saly was the type of a person you look at without blinking.

On our hikes, we mostly cleaned areas previously visited by people. On our first hike, the physics teacher explained how a plastic bottle could start a fire if sunlight was concentrated through it. Now, when we clean the area, we help the Earth. Suddenly, Gaga tells me: "I think you like Saly! You are looking at her all the time." I told him to shut up and continue walking. To be honest, I really watched Saly because I pitied her, partly because I wanted to help her avoid slipping. Her runners' soles could not hold even a butterfly. I had plimsoll keds on and was safe. I saved her from slipping down the first slope because I was next to her and managed to catch her as soon as she stumbled.

"May you be blessed! Hold my hand, please!" she asked. So, what did I have to do? We walked hand in hand like kindergarten kids during the hike. I held her hand delicately, like a sparrow. But you should see how this sparrow played soccer — how heroically she stood in the defense line. Only then did I understand why they placed a monument to Mother of Georgia and not Father.

Yeah, I have something really good to tell. That energetic woman, our civics teacher, once told us during class:

"Everyone's trying to save the planet, right? Well, let's first try to save a person. Imagine your friend has decided to commit suicide — what would you write to him or her?"

You already know I'm not much into writing letters. So, as usual, I probably wrote the dumbest one. Two lines were enough:

"If you kill yourself, bro, how will you look in the eyes of your family and friends afterwards?"

Saly, on the other hand, wrote a long letter — nearly a full page. But the point was that she wasn't preaching, like most people who love giving advice and act as if they're wiser than everyone, wiser than the God. Instead, she was telling funny stories, like: how she once took her friend's advice and joined a basketball club — though she couldn't quite get why, when she threw the ball into someone else's basket, the score still counted for her.

"Anyway, it's great — I felt real team spirit," she said. I still don't know where she dug up that phrase, "team spirit" from. Then she wrote about her parrot — apparently it had somehow learned to swear, and whenever it saw kids quarreling in the yard, it would start cursing at them. Once, one of those quarrelsome kids came to visit, and she tried to hide the parrot so it wouldn't swear at him. But the parrot said: "Where are you hiding a visitor? Show me, I'll turn everything upside down!"

And she ended her letter like this:

"Kvara's in an amazing shape! Tomorrow he's playing the club championship final with PSG — don't you want to watch it together with me?"

The teacher thanked everyone, but it was obvious she liked Saly's letter the most. She even laughed a lot and said:

"If someone's planning to kill themselves today, how do you end the letter by inviting them to watch Kvara's match the next day? And the best part — the letter doesn't even mention that the friend is planning something bad."

Anyway, that's how it was before the story of the calf began. I don't clearly remember what lesson it was, but I noticed that Saly kept staring out of the window — something she never usually did. Then she asked the teacher to excuse her and went outside. A few minutes later, I got a message:

"Luka, come outside."

"Where are you?" I wrote.

"Behind the hotel, on the field."

I went out — her eyes were red from crying.

"Are you crying? What happened? Did someone hurt you?"

"Look — a calf!"

"A calf?"

"Don't look at me, look over there, near that tree!"

I followed her gaze — a bit farther away, tied to a tree, stood a little calf.

"Ah, yeah... I see it."

"They're going to slaughter it."

"Why?"

"So the camp can have meat! They bought it today."

"How do you know?"

"I heard it by accident when I was passing by the kitchen. The cooks were saying they didn't have enough meat, so they bought it from some local."

I didn't really get what I had to do with the whole thing, but of course, I couldn't say that. I just stayed quiet, pretending to think seriously, waiting for her to say more.

"You know what happened earlier?" she said.

"What?"

“The cows and calves that were grazing on the slope — they all came up to this little one. They sniffed it, licked it, and were mooing so sadly. The calf was mooing too — and I started crying along with it.”

Now I understood why her eyes were swollen.

“And then?”

“Then the shepherd came and drove the cows away. I went up to the calf — I hadn’t noticed before, but it has a tiny white heart on its forehead. You can’t see it from far away. You should’ve seen how it cried — the tears were literally streaming down. When I touched it, it started crying even harder. It must know, right?”

“Know what?”

“Oh, come on, don’t make me say it — you know why they sold it for.”

“I don’t know... how can I know about a calf when I don’t understand what people feel?”

“That’s not good, don’t say that. You know very well that’s not true!”

Though there was nothing serious, I felt glad she said that.

“So, what are you going to do now? What should we do?”

“We have to save the calf!”

In this Eka or eco-camp, there is always someone who needs saving — one time it’s the Earth, another time it’s a person, now it’s a calf. It was my hidden thought, which I didn’t dare say aloud.

“How do we save it?”

“Let’s return it to its owner!”

“But the owner sold it! Don’t you think they’ll just sell it again?”

“Yeah, that’s true... Then what do we do?”

“Let’s untie it and send it back to the herd.”

“That shepherd’s probably local — he’ll know whose calf it is!”

“Let’s bring it to the hotel, hide it in my room — it can sleep on Giga’s or even my bed!”

“No way — there are cameras everywhere! Everyone will notice. Let’s declare a hunger strike and write to international organizations!”

Another letter, I thought. “Can’t we do this without writing?”

“You’re right,” she said. “By the time they get our letters or react, it’ll be too late. Then let’s organize a protest — we’ll make posters!”

Soon the lesson was over, and we had a break before lunch. We went back to the hotel and told the other kids about the calf. Everyone rushed outside. We showed them the crying calf, and soon they were crying too. Then we went into the presentation room — there were always markers and big sheets of paper there. We made several posters:

“Freedom for the Calf!”

“We Declare an Infinite Hunger Strike!”

“Calves Have Rights Too!”

We skipped lunch and held a demonstration in front of the hotel, shouting:

“Freedom for the calf!” “Freedom for the calf!” “Infinite hunger strike!”

Hearing the noise, Papuna came out and asked what was going on. When he saw our posters, he laughed at first. We explained everything, and he said, “Alright, show me the calf.”

When he saw it — still crying — even Papuna nearly started crying himself.

He told us to pick three representatives and go with them to speak with the camp management. We took Giga with us. The meeting at the round table didn't last long.

"Well done, kids," they said. "We'll talk to the hotel management and solve this problem."

Soon the hotel owner came too. He didn't object at all — apparently, before we even gathered, he had seen how the cows were "protesting" for their calf.

In the end, we all agreed: we'd return the calf to its owner. We refused to take our money back, on the condition that the calf would never be harmed and we'd personally check on it every summer.

Then something amazing happened. The family who had sold the calf came to meet us — they were crying. It turned out they were already planning to come to the camp to take the calf back and return the money. Their children had been looking for the calf everywhere, and when they couldn't find it, they started crying. Now they were crying again — but from joy — hugging and petting the calf.

It turned into a day of tears — everyone was crying. Probably even the Earth. They didn't want to keep the money.

"We're not doing this for the calf, but for your kids," we told them. "Buy something for them as school begins soon — not just from us, but from all of Europe, Asia, America, and the whole world."

Maybe the mention of Earth did the trick — in the end, they kept only half.

On the way back, Saly said, "Luka, isn't it wonderful that there are good people in this world?" I don't know whom she meant — probably not me, since she's the good one.

Two days later, the eco-camp ended. On the bus ride home, when kids from different schools were saying goodbye, many were crying — maybe the calf's story had gotten to everyone. I felt sad too — Saly had left the night before with her parents, and I didn't even get to say goodbye. She'd texted me: "Come outside, I'll introduce you to my parents, we're leaving," but my phone was off. I saw the message only in the morning.

So that's the story of the calf. School starts tomorrow.

Now tell me honestly — do you really think I could've written all this by myself? No, right? So, I guess I lost the bet — which means I can't skip classes and have to come prepared from now on.

Sucks to suck! Oups, I got a message:

"I don't know about the Earth, but we saved the calf, didn't we?"

It was Saly — with a little smile emoji.

Now guess who that smile belongs to — me, the calf, or the Earth?

"Yes," I replied.

"You're so laconic! And the gift? I was supposed to give you something, remember? I've got it — here, it's for you ❤️."

And of course, I replied with a heart too — how could I not?

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