

“Friends in school, not in the village”

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“Tomorrow is flag hoisting. Do you have everything ready?” Sreelatha asked her friend Suvarna, moving her bag from one shoulder to the other.

“What do you mean, everything?” Suvarna shot back, kicking her feet and raising clouds of dust.

“You know, like school dress, ribbons and the rest... Are all your things ready?” Sreelatha clarified, kicking up dust herself.

“Well, I have a new school dress, and new ribbons too. What about you?” Suvarna asked.

“Abba! I don’t have a new dress, only an old one. I have to crisp it up. Wash it with soap twice or thrice, then rinse in blue, starch and iron it, and it will dazzle like new,” said Sreelatha, preening. “But when did you get your new ones stitched?”

“When school reopened, Ayya had three uniforms stitched. I used only one and set the other two aside,” said Suvarna smugly.

“My mother said she would get me a new one after the cotton balls were picked. Till then, I have only these to wear,” Sreelatha said gloomily.

Sreelatha and Suvarna had studied in the same school from the First standard onwards. They were from the same village. After primary school, Sreelatha’s parents did not send her to the high school in the neighbouring village. Why only Sreelatha’s parents, no family in the village ever sent girls to a school outside . The reason they let them go to the village school at least was that the girls could look after the house and go to school too without much difficulty.

“Leaving flock and fowl, abandoning pots and pans, like a man, what is the use of all her learning?” thought Sreelatha’s parents, “In any case, she will have to leave with whoever we get her married to.” Even though she wanted to study, she could not oppose her parents’ decision.

Learning that Sreelatha had stopped going to school, the teacher had visited her home. “Your daughter is very intelligent. Don’t tie such a good student to the stove and pot and ruin her life.” He had argued, struggling long and hard to win her father’s ear.

Not only that, Suvarna’s father *weaver* Sambanna, had been looking out for a companion for his daughter. He was hoping that the two girls would go to school together. Sambanna sat Sreelatha’s father Poshalu down and said, “Poshanna, after all, how far is the Chennapuram school from our village? It is within earshot. It is possible to go there and return before spit dries. My daughter Suvarna will also be going there. They are both girls; they can do their house work in the morning and will be in front of our eyes at dusk.”

“I too want to send her, but I fear it’s not safe,” said Poshanna.

“Times have changed. When the world goes one way, why should we insist on going another! From generation to generation, will you keep soiling your hands and prodding your bullocks to live? Leave all this behind and send your daughter to school,” said Sambanna to Poshanna.

Poshanna thought hard. Rather than watch his daughter’s face dull with wage work, he preferred to see her smiling and playful as she went to school with her bags. “Truly, if our daughters gain knowledge, we will twirl our moustaches with pride. Somehow or the other I will send my Sreelatha to Chennapuram to study,” he assured Sambanna. From then on, Sreelatha and Suvarna went to school and returned together. They became good friends.

Suvarna’s father went from village to village on his motorcycle carrying bundles of new clothes for sale. Her mother ploughed the fields. Now, Sreelatha’s family had just half an acre of dry land. These seeds planted there gave a small crop. Her mother and father did daily-wage work to make ends meet. Sreelatha studied better than Suvarna. She took notes carefully. She went to school regularly and did her homework with ease. The teachers were full of praise of her. Sometimes, if Sreelatha had some work at home and could not go to school, Suvarna would also stay back; school was boring without her friend. It was the same for Sreelatha. When they fought they stopped talking to one another but they would quickly make up on the way and start chattering. They had fun together; they would return to the village playing happily. They would share the food they had brought from home with each other. They would exchange beads, chains, bangles and *bindis* and enjoy themselves. But all this happened only at school or on the way. Back in the village, they would go their way quietly, like separated garlic pods.

“So you are not going to wear a new dress?” asked Suvarna again.

“How can I wear what I don’t have?” replied Sreelatha with a small face.

“I have two, don’t I? Wear one,” said Suvarna, looking at Sreelatha with affection.

“*Ammo!* No! Will your people ever keep quiet if they come to know?” Sreelatha asked anxiously.

“I will get it without letting them find out,” said Suvarna with confidence.

If you so much as hold my hand in front of your mother, she looks me up and down with a hundred frowns on her face,” said Sreelatha.

“It is after all only for a day! Wear it there and take it off here. Don’t we exchanging beads and bangles? This is like that,” said Suvarna, trying to convince her.

Sreelatha too wanted to be happy wearing the new uniform. But if anybody came to know, smiles would go awry and there would be unnecessary quarrels and fights. And if there were fights, that would only lead to “Stop school. Why ask for trouble?” Still Though she was scared, she agreed to this plan for Suvarna’s sake. They parted on that note and went to their own houses.

Next morning, Suvarna brought her new uniform in her bag and put it in Sreelatha’s, saying, “You must wear it tomorrow.” Sreelatha brought the dress home but was full of anxiety. What if her parents saw it and asked, “Why do you need somebody else’s finery?” what would her reply be? But when they left early for work on the morning of *fifteenth August*, she was glad that there was nobody to stop her from wearing the new dress.

Sreelatha and Suvarna wore the new uniforms and went to school. Even during the celebrations of flag hoisting, Sreelatha’s stomach churned with the fear that her borrowed finery would lead to a loss of face. As they returned home one or two people did ask, “Your father may not have a broken paisa to hand, but he has stitched you a good dress, hasn’t he *polla?*”

Eating chocolates and biscuits on the way back, Suvarna said to Sreelatha, “Don’t wash the uniform. As soon as you return, take it off, wrap it in paper and bring it tomorrow.”

“Shouldn’t I wash it?” Sreelatha asked, surprised.

“If you wash it, people in your house will ask where the new dress came from. Our secret will be out there, right on the treetops!” said Suvarna, running to her house.

The next day, Suvarna came home, hiding the clothes Sreelatha had returned in a paper packet among her books. As soon as she saw her daughter, Suvarna’s mother said, “Are you returned, my child? The buffalo-calf has broken loose from its tether and is running here and there—bring it back.”

she took the bag of books from Suvarna's shoulder. "That calf is such a nuisance; it never stays home! No rope is strong enough to tie it down." thought her mother as she hung the bag on the wooden hook.

Meanwhile, Bhoomakka, the toddy-tapper, came in. "Kovurakka, has your daughter come back?" she asked.

"She just came in but had to go out to round the calf up. What work do you have with her, *sister*?"

"I wanted a pen from her."

"What do you want a pen for?"

"My son wants to write Buchhireddy's son's address..." replied Bhoomakka.

Suvarna's mother went into the house and put her hand in the school bag. When she could not find the pen, she put aside the books and the packet of clothes, pulled out the pen and gave it to Bhoomakka. Then, as she returned the books into the bag, she saw the clothes in the torn paper wrapping. She saw the slightly soiled white blouse and the blue *skirt*. "Why has this girl put dirty clothes in her bag?" she wondered. "I'll ask her when she comes back," she thought as she laid them aside.

Suvarna drove the calf back, handing her the rope to tie the animal, her mother asked "*Bidda*, where are the clothes in your bag from?" Suvarna was thrown off balance by this sudden question. She hadn't anticipated that her mother would see the clothes and ask her about them. She didn't know what to say. Too startled even to make up a lie, she told the truth hesitantly, fearfully.

"What is wrong with you, you miserable wretch?! First, Why did you give those clothes to that Madiga girl? And then you bring it back!! Why have you put them among the books after taking them back from her?" her mother shouted, rushing into the house. She picked up the package of clothes and threw it in the yard in a rage.

"I gave it because she is my friend. What if I did?" asked Suvarna quietly.

"Friends! Friendship is only in school, not in our village! You have ruined the new clothes. Burn them! Why did you bring them back? How can you wear it after that creature has worn it?! If you didn't understand this, didn't that thing at least know? How dare she make you carry the clothes she wore!" she ranted, beating the child in a blind fury.

"May her study become worthless rocks! As soon as she learnt four alphabets she has forgotten the difference between high and low. Has her pride gone to her head? Have her parents not told her the difference in our status? Why are you standing still? Pour kerosene and set it on fire!" She drove her daughter away, went to the water trough and

washed her hands clean. Suvarna stood weeping, looking at the clothes that had fallen out of the torn packet.

“Poor Sreelatha, exactly what she feared has happened. I had to give mother the bag and run after this animal, otherwise I could have hidden the clothes safely. The secret is out. Curse this calf!” Suvarna thought. More than the beating her mother had given her, she was distressed by the abuse of her bosom friend. Leaning on the fence, she sobbed uncontrollably.

“Aren’t you human, girl? I asked you to pour kerosene on the clothes and burn them, and you stand there stubborn!” cried her mother, fetching the kerosene from the stove. She poured it on the clothes and prepared to set fire to them. Suvarna, as she stood in tears, was moved to action by a sudden flash that commanded her hands and legs. She snatched up the clothes, the legs raced heedless to Sreelatha’s house. Suvarna’s mother stood frozen in shock, unable to follow her child.

Translated from the Telugu original by R. Srivatsan