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An Introduction to the Stories of A. V. Suraweera

LEROY ROBINSON

There is a considerable body of writing in English by authors of Sri Lanka, but most of it is not well known even among readers of Commonwealth countries, let alone readers of other non-English speaking countries such as Japan (where English literature is well known).

The main purpose of this article is to introduce two previously unpublished short stories by Alankarage Victor Suraweera, a contemporary Sri Lankan writer of fiction, whose work is gaining attention in his homeland and abroad.

But first, a brief introduction to Suraweera himself: Alankarage Victor Suraweera was born October 10, 1930. The son of a rural family, he grew up near the interior town of Gampaha, about twenty-five miles from Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka. He attended the Government English School in Gampaha. He later graduated from the most prestigious high school of Sri Lanka, Royal College, Colombo. In 1954 he graduated from the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. In 1957 he was awarded a Master's Degree and in 1964 a Ph. D. by the same university. He is now Professor of Sinhalese and Chairman of the Department of Sinhalese at Sri Jayawardenepura University, Nugegoda.

Suraweera has published many scholarly studies on Sri Lankan cultural and literary subjects. In 1959 his book on the culture of the Anuradhapura Period won him a State Award. In 1968 his critical edition of The Rajavaliya, a classic of Sinhalese literature, won him another State Award.

In the 1970s Suraweera on an Asia Foundation grant gained experience in creative writing during a year's participation in the writing program at the University of Iowa. (On his return to Sri Lanka he organized a similar program at his own university.) More recently, he spent a year at the University of Kent, Canterbury, U. K., where on a Commonwealth Fellowship he did research on the sociology of literature.
Suraweera’s creative works include four novels and three volumes of short stories. His last novel, *Sada Melesa Puraderene* (1980), won a State Award, as did two of his collections of short stories. Some of his fiction has been translated into German and Russian.

As a short story writer Suraweera is probably at his best when he writes about children who discover the nature of evil surrounding them, children who try not to surrender. The following two stories, “After the Volleyball Match” and “The Big School”, follow a similar theme.

1. *After The Volleyball Match*

I was overjoyed when Mother gave me permission at last to go out for the Sports meet. I knew she did so with much reluctance. Perhaps she feared that I would get into bad company. Surely, I should know how to conduct myself. Anyway, I took extra care not to displease Mother during the New Year period. ¹ After all, she had been so nice to me. Knowing that she would not let me go before taking lunch after a bath I went on my own to the well. Normally, I would have grumbled about the formalities observed on the New Year, but I volunteered to listen to Mother and Grand-dad and perform all the ceremonies, oil anointing, taking the first meal, starting work at the auspicious hour and what not, just to please them and sneak out as soon as possible.

I wanted to go out for the sports meet organised by the District Council held on the play ground of my own school for more reasons than one. Teams representing the Community Centre of our village were taking part in many events. For over a month there was much enthusiasm over the forthcoming sports meet. Those selected for the events had daily practice while others talked of their merits and demerits. I was particularly keen to witness the Volleyball match. Our team had won all the matches so far played and if it could beat the Henarathgoda team we would be District Champions. And this would entitle our team to play for the All-Island

¹) Sinhala and Hindu New Year are celebrated on 12th and 13th of April.
tournaments.

Besides witnessing the sports meet itself there was yet an other more important reason why I wanted to go that day. It was just a few days prior to the New Year that Mother had brought the new B. S. A. push bicycle for me. Hence, I wanted to take the earliest chance possible of riding my new bike to Gampaha, a distance of five miles. Otherwise, I would have to wait another ten days before the next school term started. I had my own bicycle and the sports meet was held in my own school. So, why not take the chance? Surely, the New Year would have been miserable to me had Mother not given permission to go.

I dressed myself in the new white shirt and the blue pair of shorts which I received as a New Year gift from my uncle and was ready to leave.

'Son, you be very careful in riding your new bicycle. Please remember not to get into the company of bad friends and while away your time. And you must come back before it is dark'. Mother advised me as I left.

At the junction there was a big crowd waiting for the bus. Sirisena, a schoolmate of mine, was there too, but I passed them all pretending not to notice anyone. I imagined how they would be envious of me when I passed them like a bird. If not for the bicycle, I, too, would be standing there with aching knees before I could creep into a bus. Getting a seat was out of the question. And what a journey it had been, getting crushed and pushed from side to side, five days a week, up and down!

In contrast to that wretched bus ride, what a pleasure it was to ride my new bike! Paddling uphill was not easy but on level roads it was sailing. And what a joy it was to go downhill through the cool breeze settled comfortably on the spring seat! The faster I went the merrier it was to feel the breeze cut through my ears. I listened to the sweet melodies automatically produced. If you want to really enjoy life you should ride downhill on a new bicycle.

When I thought of the rickety old one I used in learning to ride, I felt that riding my new BSA was even more comfortable than flying on an
aeroplane. I could see my own face through the shiny ball fixed on the handle. The reflection of my face in the little bell was prettier and more robust than what was usually seen through the mirror at home. I observed with admiration how my hair got dishevelled as I cut through the air. And my own smile, how attractive it was!

With a sudden outburst of joy within me I occasionally rang the bell. Its music echoed round me with a continuous vibration. Mother had said that cycling a distance of five miles was a tiring job. Really nonsense! More tiring it was to get squeezed in the bus and let the nauseating smell of petrol and sweat penetrate into my nostrils. Thanks to Mother I was spared all that agony.

I left my bicycle at a wayside stall in town and walked towards the play ground. The streets were full and everyone was talking about the sports meet. I walked fast to be there in time so as not to miss a single event. Large banners hung across the street reminded me of the commencement time, and music emanating through the loud speakers was heard from a distance. The quiet playground we used for morning exercises on normal school days had turned into a hive of activity. I could not recall a single occasion when the playground was so crowded. Our own annual sports meets failed to attract such big crowds.

The weather was ideal. There was bright sunshine and some of the visitors even used umbrellas to cover their heads. A young Mother was seated under the shade of a tree and was feeding her crying little baby with her breast. Some others flocked towards the ice-cream van.

I went right close to the pavilion that was temporarily erected at the west end of the ground and watched the proceedings. The sports meet was formally declared open by the M. P. for Gampaha by hoisting the National Flag. Formalities such as lighting the traditional lamp and speech making took so much time even as to lose the patience of the public.

The first item was blowing of baloons! Thirteen girls stood in a row each having a baloon in hand. I was surprised to see girls from my
own class, Nanda and Susila, among them. Gunawathie represented our village. With the sound of the whistle the game started. Each one of them had to push one's balloon over to the other side. At first Susila was leading, but soon her balloon was blown a few yards back unexpectedly. Similarly others, too, were faced with the same problem. One had to fight against nature to succeed. As the balloons retreated, the girls had to jump up with hands raised and push them forward. As they jumped up not only their long tresses of hair and breasts but also their frocks flow upwards while they were concentrating on their respective balloons. The onlookers cheered their favourites.

It was fun to witness such events as 'Coconut-Scraping,' 'Mat-Weaving' and 'Bun-eating.' Climbing up the oily pole was another interesting spectacle to see. One chap climbed almost to the top amidst applause when he slipped down right to the bottom thereby losing the chance of victory, but I admired the poor fellow trying hard over again. However I was all the time impatient to witness the volley-ball game.

'Attention please. The volley-ball game will commence in a few minutes. The players of the two teams-Henarathgoda and Egodawatta are requested to stand by.'

No sooner than the public address system carried the announcement people started pushing towards the Volley-ball court on the south end. I was fortunate in getting pushed forward right near the rope. That was more than I expected.

The players were ready. The Referee took his position and the game started with the sounding of the whistle. The ball was thumped from side to side briskly, both teams displaying equal strength. The first point was scored by the Henarathgoda team and there erupted roars of cheering and shouting and applause for that side. Not many onlookers were present from our village. Even those who had come were busy witnessing other events. What a shame! I thought it was my duty to give our players the moral strength they so much lacked. Waiting for a good ball played by our side and taking so much courage I shouted, 'Come on Egodawatta' many times. I was glad there were a few others to join me. I called the names of players.
whom I knew including that of the Captain, Cyril. ‘Come on Cyril, Come on Captain, Cheer up, Come on Ratne. . . .’"

From then on it took a surprisingly different turn and our side took the upper hand. Even some of those who cheered for the other side did not fail to applaud our players. Dharmarathe of the Henarathgoda team played strong dash shots, but none could beat our skipper, Cyril. Dashes played by Cyril were too strong for the other side.

Cyril was wearing blue shorts and a short-sleeved banian. The sturdy muscles of his thighs and arms danced to tune as he jumped up to give the shots. The inflated ball was just a toy when he thumped it. Our players were in good form under his guidance and they gave no chances to their rivals. Cyril excelled them all. Every one agreed that it was Cyril’s match and everyone cheered him and praised him. He certainly gave a first class exhibition of volley-ball. The game ended with full honours to our side and it was unanimous that Cyril was the hero of the day. I heard people talking of the possibility of the Egodawatta team winning the All-Island challenge Cup, too.

The chief guest himself came up to Cyril and offered congratulations. Our players and a few others carried Cyril round the playground and even tossed him up with outbursts of joy. I did not hesitate to join them with no less enthusiasm.

I was so fascinated by the exhibition of his sparkling talent that I felt like embracing him. However, I restrained myself and walked up to him to offer congratulations. I held both his hands but was unable to decide what I should say. I was glad to touch his sturdy fists still moist with sweat.

‘Oh, Young Master, you too have come to see the match. I am so glad you came’, said Cyril with a smile and held my right hand firmly.

‘Yes, I am proud of you, Cyril Aiya. I like you very much. You have brought honour to our village.’

I had no inclination to leave him. The other players had left already. It was about 5 O’clock and I recollected Mother’s warning that I should re-
turn before dark. It was time for me to leave but I could not make up my mind. If I had had my own way I would have taken him back home in procession.

I suggested that he go to the well in the school garden and take a wash.

'That’s a good idea. Thank you. In fact I was wondering where to take a wash. I didn’t know where the well was.'

As he finished washing, I gave him his shirt, trousers and his shoes.

'How did you come, Cyril Aiya? Aren’t you going back now?'

'I came by bus. I want to go.'

I offered him a lift on my bicycle. He was agreeable. We had tea at the wayside stall where I had left the bicycle. I had already paid the bill when he called the waiter. I was glad that I had enough money with me to stand the bill.

'That’s too bad. You shouldn’t have done that, Young Master.'

I gave a shy smile not knowing what to say.

He pulled out of his pocket, a packet of Three Roses Cigarettes and a box of matches and lighted one. I watched with admiration how he had the first pull and puffed a circle of smoke into the air.

'Don’t you smoke, Young Master?'

'I would rather not,' said I in an uncertain tone not being able to decide what to say.

'You like to try one? Today is a special day, isn’t it? He offered me the packet. I had seen boys in my class smoking in isolated corners and in the toilet but never before did I have any inclination to smoke. Now that Cyril had made a request I thought it was impolite to disappoint him. It was a special day as he himself mentioned. Really it was. I wanted to show him that the day was special for me, too. I looked round to ascertain that there was no one known to me from school or from my village. Then I held
the cigarette between my lips for Cyril to light it for me. The smoke I in-
haled went right into my throat and nose thereby bringing about a dry cough. I felt rather embarrassed.

'Never mind, you will soon be all right,' he said with a smile.

The cigarette did not please me at all. I wondered how Cyril could enjoy inhaling that dry tobacco smoke.

'Don't you tell your mother that you were smoking with me,' he said probably after reading my thoughts. I gave an agreeable smile. Then he bought me a large size slab of chocolate. I was reluctant to accept it, too.

'It's a new year gift from me. You keep it, Young Master.'

I was proud to have received a gift from no less a person than the Captain of our Volley-ball team.

I was hoping to keep him on the pillion and ride the bike myself. I should not let him exert himself any more. But he did not let me have my own way. He took the bicycle himself and asked me to sit on the front bar. I had resolved not to let anyone else ride the bicycle. However, I did not mind Cyril doing anything with it. After all he was the hero who had achieved so much honour. I found him to be not only a master Volley-ball player but also an expert cyclist. How lightly he rode it!

Now and then I touched the ball that was in the basket hung on the handle. I secretly enjoyed feeling the smooth surface of the ball. And now and again I felt the warmth of his hands when they touched mine.

As we came to the foot of a hill I suggested that we get down and walk. He turned a deaf ear and continued riding without showing any fatigue. Then I sat on the bar very lightly in order that I give no extra weight. When we came to a steeper hill we got down and that, too, upon my suggestion. On such occasions I took the bike and pushed it with the idea of giving him some rest.

We talked about the office where he worked as a temporary clerk, about his school days, about my school and my studies and also about the
volley ball game. He invited me to come and play volley ball on Saturdays and Sundays at the Village Community Centre. I imagined as to how I would be a good player under the expert guidance of Cyril and how I would play for the School team and win colours. How fortunate I was to have gained acquaintance with such a nice person of noble character as Cyril, I thought. I decided to obtain Mother’s permission and go out for Volley ball practice the very next Saturday. That was certainly a chance that other boys of my age would never get.

It was nearly 6 O’clock as we approached the fourth mile post. We had come within the boundary of our village. We could see the setting sun amidst crimson clouds through the branches of trees from a distance. It reminded me of the Volley ball that rested in the basket just in front of me. There was not a soul on the road but the two of us. The vegetable stall by the roadside had been closed for the New Year. Our conversation had stopped for some time and I knew that Mother would be restless. I was glad that I could get back home before dark.

‘Young Master, You have not visited anyone, I guess, for the New Year?’ asked Cyril after a long pause.

‘No, not as yet. We are invited for dinner at Aunty’s tomorrow.’

‘Shall we just drop in at Jane Akkas for a few minutes? I have to convey a short message. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘Will it take long? Mother is expecting me before dark.’

‘You may proceed then. I want to meet her urgently. Thanks for the lift.’

How could I leave him there? I considered it impolite on my part to let him walk home. He had to walk a distance of about half a mile passing my home. Had I left him there, it would mean that he had to walk over a mile and a half. I was not used to visiting village folks other than my close relatives. Mother would not like it, either. However under any circumstance, I did not want to let him walk all that distance. I therefore volunteered to join him in spite of my realizing his desire to take leave of me.
We turned off from the main road into a narrow pathway crowded with branches of trees and bushes that grew on either side. As the wheels of the bike cut through the rugged gravel pathway it gave a continuous growl digging into my heart. My new bicycle! If I were to have my own way, I would have turned back, but I lacked courage or the inclination to let him walk alone.

I knew this woman Jane, who used to come to the village temple on Full Moon days, but never had I stepped into her house. And I knew her elder son, Jinadasa, too, as a mischievous lad detested by all. As we approached her house I saw Jane seated on the front doorstep. A child of about three years wearing a dirty gown was playing with sand by herself in the compound. I knew that Jane’s husband had died when he fell from a coconut tree many years ago.

She did no notice us until we stopped right in front of her. She was taken completely by surprise.

‘Ane! I was shocked. Didn’t you go for the match, Cyril Malli?’ She gave us a smile and stood up pulling her chintzcloth into place round her waist. She was wearing a cloth and jacket much cleaner than the dress of the little one.

‘Why not? we are just returning from Gampaha. I met Young Master at the play ground.’

Cyril took me by the hand and sat on the only bed that was in the open verandah without any invitation. His behaviour showed himself to be a familiar visitor there. I followed Cyril and sat in one corner. On the bed was spread a dirty worn out mat. She quickly went in and brought a cleaner mat and tried to spread it for us. We let her do so and sat again. It was nearly dark outside. I saw through the front window a small kedosene oil lamp lit inside with the bare light coming through the window. I noticed the discoloured clay walls and the dirty roof never cleaned for years.

‘What a blessing it is for the New Year that Cyril Malli came with our Young Master,’ said Jane. ‘School Teacher at home, young Master?’
She asked referring to Mother. That was how every one in the village addressed her.

'Yes She was. I left home after lunch.' I replied shyly. 'My son, Jinadasa, too went to Gampaha. Didn't you see him, Cyril Malli?'

'Oh yes, I think I saw him. The bus will take another hour or so for him to return.' said Cyril.

Then Cyril gave an account of the sports meet and particularly of the Volleyball match. While listening she went inside and without much delay came with a plate full of oil cakes and milk rice and placed it on the bed between Cyril and myself.

'Very rarely that such worthy ones like our Young Master would visit us. Please take an oil cake.' So saying she cast a coquettish glance at Cyril. 'Cyril. 'Cyril Malli, you should be tired. Help yourself.'

Taking an oil case herself she gave it to Cyril and went inside. The plate itself was dirty and the place was nauseating. I did not have the inclination to eat.

'Jane Akka, Jane Akka,' Cyril called softly but she did not show herself.

'Maybe she is making tea. Let me help her' Cyril went in, too. I heard them whispering and giggling from inside. Shortly Cyril came out and sat by my side again. He held his wrist watch to the dimlight coming through the window. Then Jane, too, came out with two cups of tea and offered them to us, first to me and then the other to Cyril. I tried to sip the tea, not minding my burning lips, with the idea of leaving the place soon. It was certainly getting late.

'It is only half past six. Jane Akka wants an application written for her. It won't be long. Please be seated here. I'll be back in no time.' He went in even before I could remind him that I had to leave soon. And Jane had followed him.

I had been ignoring the headache which I got when I tried to smoke that cigarette. Once again it overpowered me and as time passed I was feeling
terribly bad. My head was threatening to burst out somewhere round the forehead.

But for the little one playing by herself not a soul could be seen anywhere amidst the gloomy environment. Being unable to sit on that rickety old bed full of bugs I stepped out to the compound and started walking shout. The eerie atmosphere was so frightening that I was scared even to move my limbs. And to make matters worse I was reminded that the Cemetery was near by. An owl made its shrill cry from a tree just over my head. As I was used to such occasions, I chanted the ‘Itipiso’ Stanzas many times and luckily it was heard no more. I then realized that swarms of mosquitoes were screaming around me. It was hell on earth.

Then, again, again, I was reminded of Jane. I felt as though I was making a sacrifice, myself, for her. I recollected how this miserable woman came to the temple with her child and shed tears over her dead husband. My father too had died about the same time. But how could I compare Jane with Mother? Mother had a job and so many relatives and friends to console her. Jane had been left alone with hunger and poverty. Moreover, she had to look after the children.

I was glad that Cyril volunteered to write the application for her. It might be an appeal for a destitute allowance. Under these circumstances I did not mind getting late and even facing a scolding from Mother. Cyril was a very kind person, a gem of a man.

I must have waited there for nearly a quarter of an hour. But Cyril never came out. He should have called me in. It was wrong on his part to have left me outside in darkness. As time passed, my patience waned. How could I face Mother? Being unable to bear up any longer, I went round the house with the idea of calling him through the outer window. I peeped through the window that was half open. I could see the inside of the room through the dim light of the kerosene lamp placed on the floor. I expected Cyril to be seated at a table or some such thing and be writing. Instead he was squatting barebodied on a stretched out mat. I saw the lower part of a female body, too, lying down naked. Cyril kissed her and
then started feeling her breasts I could not believe my eyes.

I was reminded of the old woman who won the coconut-scraping race. I could not imagine that Cyril was the same person who a few hours back, amidst thunders of applause and cheers, captained our team to victory and brought honour to our whole village. That same Cyril was now engaged in feeling the dirty breasts of a wretched widow with those very same precious fingers. Being unable to believe my own eyes I turned away disgustingly and went back to the compound where my bicycle was halted.

Cyril would have gone in with the compassionate thought of writing that application for her. I felt like running into that room to give her a kick and pull Cyril out. But I was uncertain as to what had really happened. How he was conducting himself was not indicative of any compulsion on the part of Jane. He was taking the initiative. The very person who had been the the hero of the day should not be allowed to be dominated by that worthless widow. Cyril for sure had the strength to push her aside like a piece of rag. Why should he sit on that dirty mat beside her stinking body and kiss her with so much affection? Was he a man of mean character? In order to ascertain what had really happened I went down quietly again and had a peep through the window. I saw him sending his right arm round her shoulder and embracing her firmly.

It was not possible for me to be associated with that dirty nonsense any longer. Coming back to my bicycle I threw the bag containing the ball and also the slab of chocolates which he had bought for me hard on the bed and started riding home in the dark as fast as I could.

2. The Big School

"Any mail?" enquired father as he stepped out of the door wiping his face with a white towel.

For the past two weeks we were impatiently expecting the letter. Usually, Father would wait near the kiln of karathelis to bring the two bucketsful of latex from the Rubber Estate and see them weigh them accu-
rately. He would not leave before the latex was put into the pans. He had broken this routine and come home early this day as he wanted to get the letter himself straight from the postman. Father was confident that the long-expected letter would come anytime bearing the good news. There was no reason for doubt after he had heard of my mother's dream.

“Wonder if the letter had been delivered elsewhere? Surely the postman knows,” Father was obviously pacifying himself.

People in our village knew that I had taken the Royal College Entrance Examination. The postman knew, too. As the letter got delayed Father realized the mistake of not keeping this a secret.

The postman slowed his bicycle. As he rang the bell and got off the bike Father was half way towards the gate. I ran after him, too.

“May be the Young-Master's letter,” the postman said smiling as he handed a long envelope. It was an official letter with the words ‘On Her Majesty’s Service' printed on top of it.

“Ah! the letter?” Mother leapt to her feet towards us. The letter it was! Uncertainty reigned for a moment. Selected or not? It took sometime for Father to open it. He knew enough English to read a short letter. With trembling hands he opened it and with no glasses on he held the letter closer to his eyes and read it. His face blossomed like a lotus in the morning sun. I had been selected, gee! Yes... to the first year University Entrance grade. I was requested to report to school on January 5 with all the necessary documents.

“I knew everything would be the way we expected”, Father breathed with satisfaction. “Didn’t I tell you that son would get admission?”

“Thank God! The moment I had the dream, I knew this. It was all white Gorakavilla, the pond that never goes dry. Full of lotuses. Yes... all white. Son walked far into the pond and piucked a whole heap of lotuses... pure white lotuses. He brought them all to me. To his dear mother. Not to anybody else... “Mother went on.
"Son, you should become a doctor. This is an honour to our family," said Father. He had said these words many times before. But this time he repeated them in an emphatic tone so different from what I had heard before. It was the first time that these words I had heard often earlier got into my heart and I felt as if they had settled down deep within me. Father was a heart patient and about twice monthly he would visit the doctor. If I were a doctor I would attend to father myself. Attend even to other patients. If I were a doctor I could bring honour to our family as Father always used to say.

Father read the neat type-written letter many times over.

"Oh, it's sent under registered cover. You see how things are done in big places. Not like the Gampaha school, " Father said and he said it so as Mother could overhear.

"Son, would you please see the date of the letter."

"22. 11. 1956" I read.

"Today is the twenty third. It has taken only a day to reach us all the way from Colombo. I knew the postman wouldn't delay. Anyway, not many days to go. January fifth, hm! So much to be done before that," Father said.

That evening we visited our 'English-Uncle'. He taught English in the village school. My parents never failed to consult my mother's brother on all important family matters.

"I don't really know, brother, how we are going to manage all these things. We aren't well to do, as you know. But this just has to be done. . . Even at the cost of our small plot of land. Isn't it? This, our one eye", said Mother by way of opening the discussion.

Father suggested that I should join a boarding house in Colombo. However, after a long discussion it was eventually decided that I travel from home. It was a fifteen minutes' walk to the train station from home and another one hour's travel by train.
“I’ll try to help all I can. It’s wonderful he’s selected. I know Young-Master is careful in doing things,” said English-Uncle.

It was only then that I came to realise the burden that had fallen on my parents. Even at the Gampaha school, I shunned tea-houses where my friends would while away their time smoking. Such behaviour was repugnant to me and I detested such guys. I resolved not to be a financial burden on the parents.

That night I couldn’t sleep. The clock struck eleven, twelve and one. Like the waves of the ocean, dashing against the shore rising and falling, rising and disappearing, my mind dashed toward towards thoughts of the future. . . . . I walk smartly along the corridor of the hospital with the Stethoscope round my neck. People look on with great respect. It is as though with miraculous power that a doctor is able to diagnose every case. Moreover, it is a meritorious deed to treat and comfort the sick people who are helpless. And now would Father and Mother feel when I first take up appointment as a doctor at the Gampaha hospital!

The following morning we went to get the leaving certificates. Having congratulated me, the Principal spoke about Royal College as if he knew everything.

“The majority of the students there come from the upper class, you know. They are the sons of Ministers, Civil Servants, Magistrates, Lawyers and what not? Thanks to free education, 1) you don’t have to pay school fees. You know that, don’t you? But from now on you might have to do things a little different!” He became silent for a few moments and turned his head towards the roof, with eyes closed. Then, all of a sudden, he looked at Father and said emphatically, “Otherwise they won’t care for you.”

Father was quite pleased to hear all this. And proud, too. But I wasn’t happy. There was confusion within me. I knew Father was not too well

1) Free education was introduced to all schools in Sri Lanka including the Universities in 1945.
off. He might have to sell the land, who knows? The only substantial in-
come was what he got by selling rubber sheets. He got about three hundred
rupees, every two months or so. No tapping was done during the rainy sea-
son which lasted about three months. Of course, we didn’t have to buy rice
or coconuts. But still, could we possibly do things the way the upper class
did? Whenever I thought of that incident, the day I went for the admission
test I got angry. I got a feeling of hatred. I got frightened. Frightened
of what I did not know.

That day we got down at the Racecourse, but had walked up and
down over a mile before a Rickshawman showed us the big gate. We
walked hurriedly as we were nearly late. As we walked I could overhear
some of the words uttered by the boys playing on the playground. Much
as I tried to forget the remarks cast at us these words got entangled in my
bosom like dirty, cold snakes.

“Hey, yon guys, see that village bum”?
“Straight from ‘Shabby-land’ looks like anyway”
“More like from the African Wilderness.”
“Ah! that’s it--That’s it. A real country bum.”

How fluently they spoke English! Words just flowed out. I would
sure have to learn to speak English as fluently soon.

It was not hard to realize that they were casting remarks at us, par-
ticularly at my father, at his dress and at his hair tied in a knot. I walked
as though I did not hear them. Father too must have heard them. But
never once did he mention this incident I could not hear these words. Father
was being subjected to ridicule in my presence. What could I do?

Father was more keen that I was about my admission to Royal. The
news that I was admitted to Royal had spread through the village like wild
fire. It was with a sense of satisfaction and pride that Father mentioned
this to our relatives and other villagers.

“You know, Young-Master has gained admission to Royal College. The
Principal at the Gampaha School said that only sons of upper class families
came there. Sons of Honourable Ministers, Government Agents, Magistrates and District Judges. Of Doctors too”, Father repeated. This was to imply that I too had hit the road leading to the upper class—that class of Ministers and Magistrates and Barristers.

“Oh what a blessing: Maybe we could get a welfare allowance passed at our old age,” a villager said.

“No, Young-Master is going to be a Doctor. You must know that, Doctor”.

“Thank God: Maybe we could get a dose of medicine before our last breath.” They cast a different look, more respectable than usual. I enjoyed all this talk in silence.

But on the day of the admission test itself the feeling I had was a kind of contempt for Royal College. However, the thought of getting admission with a view to entering the path that leads to high society by passing higher examinations and getting lucrative jobs was growing in my mind all the time. And to achieve this goal I should first of all gain admission to Royal. My doubt was whether I would ever be welcome among them. I could not speak English in the manner they did. Words just flowed out of their lips. My teeth and tongue did not seem to have the necessary training. I wouldn’t be stepping out of a big Pontiac at the portico. No long pants, either. I had only two pairs of white shorts and another blue, and two short sleeved shirts. Who knows what more I would require. Yet, I shouldn’t disappoint Father and Mother. Their aspirations were high.

On Monday 5, Father and I set out from home before dawn at 5. 32 on the dot. It was the auspicious time calculated for us by the village high-priest. As we came to the foot-path we met Andiya carrying a plough on his shoulder and driving two long-horned buffaloes. He was his way to the field.

“Damn it: You just can’t avoid this wretched rascal,” Father muttered to himself as Andiya passed by. And turning to me he said, “We started at the correct time anyway.”
As we got off the bus at the Racecourse and walked towards College, I felt as though some weight was tied to my legs. I could hardly change steps. Father was walking in front of me. He stopped and turned back many times as if to see why I was lagging behind.

Looking from afar the College buildings resembled the Colombo Museum I had once seen. The huge monument at the middle of the round-about might be that of a high class gentleman, now dead. Who knows, his ashes were buried there within it? The street was shaded with huge Mara trees and the entire place appeared gloomy and lonely. The shrieking of bats hanging down from the trees sickened me. I felt as if we were left alone in a jungle. We had arrived about an hour ahead of time and the whole place was quieter than usual. The gate was still locked. It was about fifteen minutes before the watcher opened the gate. We went in. Would those fellows try their jokes on Father again I contemplated.

There were ten new boys for admission including myself. Two of them had come with their mothers and one with his father. I was worried about my dress. However, everything worked out well for two others were wearing short pants like myself. One by one we had to go into the Principal’s office for registration. Father opted to go last of all. As instructed I was holding the sheaf of betel leaves with both hands. I felt rather uneasy for all eyes were directed towards me. I was the only one carrying betel. I talked to father about this but he insisted that I should offer the betel to the Principal.

“Don’t you hesitate. It is a good custom, my son,” Father said.

It was our turn to go in. Unlike the Principal of my former school this one appeared to command respect. He appeared dignified, too. All four walls of his room were covered with shelves lined up with big books and glass cases with gold cups and shields. The fan hanging from the ceiling was turning at a fast speed. The reflection of the light emanating from the bulbs attached to the fan made the Principal look more dignified. Taking a few steps forward Father bowed humbly with clasped hands. Then, on Father’s signal, I offered the sheaf of betel and bent down in obeissence.
With a sarcastic smile on his face the Principal muttered something which I did not quite hear. He must have said that there was no necessity of offering betels. Father had even wanted to take two large pineapples from our garden. Fortunately, the idea was dropped.

The Principal examined the documents without any comments. Then he gave me a note and pressed the shiny brass bell that was on his table twice. He merely looked at the peon who appeared instantly. No words.

The peon led us out of the room. Father would have liked to spend a longer time with the Principal making further details about the school and my future. He had wanted to ask about the medical profession and also what and what subjects I should take towards that end, but he didn't get a chance. It was time for me to go to class.

"You needn't come, I'll take him," said the peon to Father.

I followed the peon a short distance and looked back. Father kept standing in the corridor and was gazing at me climbing the stairs with eyes and mouth agape.

I was glad that Father did not accompany me to class. If he had come he would have been ridiculed by the boys as on the previous day. Besides, in the absence of Father, I could hide the other sheaf of betel that was meant to be offered to the Class Teacher. I just chucked it in my pocket unseen by anybody.

Having cleared one hurdle successfully and not knowing what was to come next I entered the class with a trembling heart. I had the feeling of a thief getting on the witness box. The boys were seated at their desks placed in rows, each about two feet apart. As I entered they all stared at me in surprise. I remembered the arrangement of the desks when I went for the G. C. E. Examination a few years back. The desks in the class room were arranged in the same order. I walked quietly to the teacher's table. My feet seemed to drag behind me. The teacher was writing something and did not see me.

"Sir, Sir," the boys called.
There was a snapping of shoes. The teacher looked around not knowing what had happened. I was nervous and frightened, too. With both hands I respectfully handed over the note given by the Principal. After a quick glance at the note and then at my face looking around and noticing an empty desk he directed me to sit there. My seat was by the wall in the fourth row. The teacher attired in full European dress must have been in his forties.

He rose from his seat and looking around spoke to me. In English, of course.

“What was your name, again?”
“B. G. Abeyapala, Sir.”
Everybody looked at me. I did not know how many of them heard my voice.

“Beg your pardon.”
“B. G. Abeyapala, Sir” I repeated. My voice was drowned in a loud giggle.

“What? I can’t hear you.” He turned his right ear towards me.

“He is deaf,” I heard someone say.


“Abeyapala, Good. What school do you come from?”
“Government English School, Gampaha?”
“Gambija” 2 someone called.
I had been tutored in these questions by English-Uncle and also the replies that should be given. I felt weltry.

As the bell rang, there was a great commotion. It was the ten-min-break. Many of the boys went out of class. I sat at my desk. Four or five boys barged in and began to pour questions on me in English.

When I repeated my name as an answer to one of their questions, they shouted “Gambija” again. I was enraged. But what could I do?!! I

2) Gam-Village; Bijja-Testicle; Gambija means ‘The testicled one from the village.’
just grinned naively and looked down. I could feel the sweat pouring down
my back.

“Damned hot, isn’t it?” said one.
“Where do you come from, Gambijja” asked another.
“Gampaha,” I said.
“Where’s Gampaha?”
“About fifteen miles from Colombo,”
“How do you come?” What make of car do you have?”

I was most embarrassed. However, I did not fail to smile or grin
over everything they said. I recalled that incident when a little sparrow was
being attacked by a flock of crows. The poor little thing cried in pain spread-
ing its shattered wings. I drove the crows away and saved the sparrow.
But, alas! there was none to save me. Where could Father be? Was he
being manhandled, too?

“Gambijja, how d’ you come?”
“I came by train”,
“Came by rain, ho! rain.”
“You don’t seem to have got wet,”

It was useless to explain. Anyway, they settled down to ask further
questions.

“What’s your father?”
“My father is a cultivator,” this is what English Uncle had taught me.
The guys around me burst out in laughter. Why did they laugh? Was it
my English? There was peace of mind only when the teacher arrived after
the bell.

Father had gathered a lot of information regarding my classmates. To
me on our way back home, and to Mother and English-Uncle at home,
Father related in detail everything he had heard. Mother listened in amaze-
ment when Father proudly talked about the parents of my classmates. Sons
of the Government Agent, of the Colombo Magistrate, of the Director of
Education, they were all in my class.

“What luxury cars! One after another, they come. Like princes they
get down at the gate and walk in. It sure was something to see.”
The habit of casting remarks at me in class ceased in course of time. None ever noticed my presence in class. I also took care not to engage in prolonged conversation. When a teacher or a boy talked to me I got excited. When a question was put to me by a teacher the answer didn’t seem to come out of my mouth even if I knew it. What if it were wrong? I weighed carefully every word, be it merely a couple. I always preferred short answers.

"Should work harder. Too reticent in class," was the class teacher’s remark in my monthly report card.

“What’s there to talk so much if the class work is good?” said Father. The report card showed not marks but grades. I had got B only for Sinhala, and C or D for other subjects. I believed I deserved better gradings However correct my answers were, the teacher always gave C or D. This was unfair, I thought.

I used to get one Rupee or one and a quarter for the day’s expenses. At times mother borrowed this from English-Uncle or from my other Uncle who owned a boutique.

I had bought a Railway Season Ticket. The bus fare was twentyfive cents, and the balance was for lunch at the school Canteen. A meal cost fifty cents. Standing in line, one kept fifty cents on the counter and shouted, “Five-bread-dhal.” Then each got a plate with five slices of bread and a dish of yellow-peas. But I didn’t like to get pushed in the crowd. Nor did I like to sit in their midst. I’d have no peace of mind there, either. Besides, had I joined them I would have to finish my lunch and run to the playground with them. This routine I did not like.

In course of time, I discovered a suitable place to have my lunch. No sooner the bell rang I escaped from the crowd and walked down the road making sure not to be seen by anyone known to me. Then I stepped into “Saraswathis Bhavan,” a cheap eating house. There I ate two or three Vadies, or had a few Thoseia and a cup of tea. At times I ate rice and curry. At this eating house I had the peace of mind that I would wish for. Besides, I could have a little money, too, for things were not as expensive as at other places.
Once to my great surprise, 'Mudda' came to me during the ten minutes break, and talked to me in an unusually friendly manner. By then, I had known the nicknames of everyone in class.

"Gambijja" get me twenty-five cents. I'll give you tomorrow."

I gave him the money. He neither returned the twenty-five cents, nor beared any special friendship to me thereafter. On many occasions they borrowed money from me: twenty-five, fifty and sometimes more but never did they return one.

At the 'Saraswathie Bhavan' I looked around carefully to ensure that there was no one known to me before sitting at a table at the far end screened off by a curtain. As I ate, too, I would look around to see if anyone was coming. Once, 'Galbanissa' borrowed fifty cents. That day I was seated at my usual table when I saw 'Galbanissa' and 'Padaya' come in. I started to tremble. My hairs stood on end. Why did they come? They were probably coming after me. If they saw me eating Thosai at this den they sure would spread the word. That would be a disgrace. I quietly got up and rushed out as if to go to the toilet. I returned in about ten minutes to see them seated at the other corner smoking cigarettes. I stood behind the screen watching.

Once, our class master 'Bonja' was collecting some statistics about the class. He asked the same set of questions from each of us. We had to give the father's name, address, occupation, religion, the number of family members etc. One by one we had to shout out these details from our desks. Came my turn.

"Yes, Abeypala, father's name?"

Should I give my father's name, B. Rapiel Singho? If I said this, I would be ridiculed. They would be surprised. too. In the case of everybody else, the name of the father differed only with regard to initials. What was expected of us was to shout out the initials or perhaps the first name as the case may be. 3)

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3) In upper class SriLanka society only, the western system of using the surname last is followed.
"R. S." It went by without comment. The next question was about father’s profession. Earlier, I would have said ‘Cultivator.’ But nobody else in the class had a cultivator father. Their fathers were judges, doctors, executives and so forth. Only a few of their fathers were teachers or clerks. But there was no cultivator father.

I took an instant decision and replied, “Landed Proprietor.” Two others, too, had given this same reply. At least, this was the only profession that came even close to what my father actually did.

I saw the boys looking at each other with their eyes wide open. I was rather nervous. When the other two boys gave their fathers’ profession as landed proprietors, there were some ‘shoo-shooing,’ snapping of shoes and some remarks: “Capitalist,” “Down with the lazy class,” “Wait for the revolution.” But it looked as though my father was not worthy even of such remarks. They seemed to have ignored my father, the landed proprietor.

At the usual ten minute recess that day I went down to the office to pay the Library and facilities fees. There was a big crowd waiting to pay the fees, and as usual, I waited patiently. The office and the Vice-principal’s table were separated by a long screen. I saw our class master go in, and then I overheard parts of their conversation. I heard my name being mentioned and naturally I listened carefully. “You know that guy Abeyapala? He says his father is a landed proprietor,” I heard my class master say trying to stifle his laughter.

“Who’s Abeyapala?” the vice-principal asked.

“That short guy with the face full of pimples. That timid kind of fellow who walks quietly. I know he lied.”

“I think I know him. Yes, that new boy.”

“Right. I think he’s the son of a cultivator. Village type, isn’t he? The trouble is that he does not fit in here. I’m sorry for him,” said the class master.

I began to sweat. Would the vice-principal call me in and question
me? What could I say? Shouldn't I go and explain everything before I was called. But how could I face him? My whole body seemed to dry up. May be I should drink some water I thought. I walked towards the toilet. For the rest of the day I was on pins expecting to be called at any moment. I felt like a murderer. Fortunately for me there was no call.

When school closed at half past three, it wasn't easy to get a bus to the train station. Usually I do not like to rush in. So I would wait under the shade of a tree taking my own time. However at the railway station I did not hesitate to rush into the train, for there were not many boys from my school. None from my class, anyway.

One Friday afternoon, Mr. Perera, our history teacher, got into the same bus I was in and sat by my side. He used to be friendly with the students, unlike most others. He had just graduated from the University and joined the school recently. I knew he travelled second class in the train and I was extra careful to avoid him. That day Mr. Perera recognised me and paid my bus fare, too.

"Thank you, Sir," I said. I was of course not too keen to prolong the conversation but he started to talk. I said I travelled daily from Gampaha.

"Come, we can travel together as far as Ragama. I get off there," he said to me when the bus stopped opposite the train station. I had no alternative but to follow him.

He opened the door of a second class compartment and got in calling me in, too. He sat in one corner. I sat opposite him. Two other passengers came in and sat on the other side. The compartment was lonesome and gloomy. Usually, I went third class and got pushed and squeezed in the crowd. But a second class ticket would cost double the third class fare. I, too, would prefer to travel peacefully away from the crowds. And this was the beginning of the month. Knowing that the ticket inspectors would come on a raid any time, how could I possibly have any peace of mind? Mr. Perera tried to strike up a conversation with me, and may be, realising that I did not show any interest in talking, he finally began to read the Newspaper. He
said something occasionally, but I did not hear him clearly. I could not leave him and enter the third class compartment either. I was in a trap! I looked round like a helpless rat not knowing what to do. But I tried to keep myself calm.

When it was time for the train to start a bunch of inspectors in black uniform suddenly appeared, I did not know from where. However, they passed our compartment and I felt somewhat at ease.

But, I knew an inspector could jump in any time. The train stopped at the next station and the other two passengers got off leaving only the two of us. How could I leave this death trap? The train started to pick up speed. My heart beat faster too.

People, cattle, houses, trees and fields appeared and disappeared in no time. The universe was revolving around me. Suddenly there was a sound of ‘Tak katas; Could it be a dream? I listened three compartments away. Again ‘Tak & katas.’ ‘Is there no one to save me? I thought. I felt like jumping out of the train and running away far into the field. The devil was now at arms length. My whole body was wet with sweat. Darkness was everywhere. The fan fixed to the ceiling seemed dirty. I knew I had the third class season ticket. But showing that would take me nowhere. At last the block uniformed man put his ugly head towards us from the adjoining compartment. He wore a black cap, too. His face looked like that of a devil.

“Tickets, please.”

Mr. Perera did not even turn head. He put his hand into his pocket and took out the purse. He simply raised the pink coloured ticket over the shoulder. It was returned. The Inspector did not so much as look at it. And then he stretched his hand towards me.

I rose from my seat and putting both my hands into the two pockets pretended to be searching. His outstretched hand was in the same position. He wouldn’t take it back till I showed my ticket. The fire that ran from his jutting eyes burnt my whole body.
I felt the pain in my two ears as though the heat in my heart was flowing out in that direction.

“I have not brought my ticket today.” I said humbly so as not to be heard by Mr. Perera. “Same Story, every day,” the Inspector bragged with a sarcastic smile.

Again I put my hand into the pocket. The train ran fast whistling and swaying from side to side.

“He’s a College boy! I know he had bought the ticket,” Mr. Perera said.

“O.K. I’ll let you go this time. Don’t get caught again.” With these words he disappeared.

Darkness spread everywhere. I felt faintish and leaned against the seat. I tried to explain to Mr. Perera, that I really forgot to bring my ticket. But words simply refused to come out. “Sir, Sir... I... I” was all I could say. My lips were dry.

“Forget it. That’s all right”, he said with a smile.

When the train stopped at Ragama, he got down saying, „Cheerio.” As he left I, too, got down carrying myself with great difficulty. And entering the adjoining third class compartment which was nearly empty by now I leaned myself on the seat.

Only when the Guard’s whistle woke me up I realized that the train was about to leave the Gampaha station. With all haste I jumped out of the moving train. My mind had suddenly come to a standstill, I felt as if I had to think of everything anew. How could I decide what I should do when the mind refused to function?

I found myself seated alone on an old bench under a low roof. It was drizzling, too. That was quite a secluded place to sit and ponder over what had befallen me. I recollected many times over every detail of the confrontation with the ticket inspector. What if he had not come?

Anyway the heartless rascal had put me to disrepute. What if I could
go back to my old school? But the problem was to convince my father and mother. Their ambition was to make me a doctor. Yet some others were waiting to see me crash some where on the Way. This sure will be a disgrace to my whole family. I should not let them down. How much had Father suffered because of me?

I was reminded of the mathematics test that was to be held on the following day. A lot of revision had to be done. It was already getting dark. I started running home as fast as my legs could carry until I saw Mother stepping out of the door with a lorch-light.