

A watercolor illustration on a light beige background. At the top, a thin blue string with a small red and blue knot hangs down. A small bird with a blue head, yellowish-brown body, and red feet stands on a small pink rectangular block. Below this block is a larger, taller yellowish block. To the left, a large, vibrant blue and green plant with broad leaves and a long, thin stem grows out of a blue and white patterned pot. The overall style is soft and artistic.

Sreedhevi Iyer

JUNGLE

WITHOUT WATER

The Lovely Village

A lovely village on the far side once decided to erect a fence up around itself. It was a tall, white fence, always glistening in the sun as if it had just been painted. It provided a very great protection to the village, standing so resolutely and completely around its space, at the border of the village. It let out some of the people of the village when they needed to visit far off places, but it was only for them that it would open.

The village was a charming village full of honest, industrious people who loved work and loved play, and had an earnest mayor who took his position of serving the village very seriously. They worked on land that was endlessly fertile, responding to very predictable seasons that ensured rain and sun at just the right times. The winters were not too miserable and the summers were glorious. There were not too few of them as to feel they were left out of the progress evident in other villages, nor were they too many for there to be a surfeit of people as opposed to opportunity.

Over years, some in the village also fought hard for everybody else's right to equality, which resulted in a sameness between the rich and the poor, the women and the men, the animals and the humans. It eventually became clear that everyone in this village lived a highly worthy life indeed, and the villagers were very proud of this truth. The Lord Mayor informed everyone they were right to be proud, and to keep it uppermost in their minds as they did the work they loved, as carpenter, or butcher, or gatekeeper, or painter.

As the fame of the village spread, some newcomers turned up at the fence. One day, one of the newcomers decided to talk to the gatekeeper. "Dear gatekeeper," he said, "your village is so lovely, will you not let us in?"

"Oh, how I wish I could, how dearly, but honestly, I cannot," said the gatekeeper.

"But why," responded the newcomer, "why will you not let us into this truly enchanted place, this place that you must so clearly love?"

"Oh yes, how I do love this place, but see, I am not authorised to let you in, even if I wanted to, I would lose my job if I did, and in this village nobody lets go of their work."

The newcomer agreed this was a high virtue indeed. But he and more of his kind were still on the other side of the fence, so he called out to those who were passing by, "Sir, ma'am, how lovely you are, will you please give the gatekeeper permission to let me and my friends in?"

At first nobody seemed to hear, but then a little girl looked for the voice and shrieked when she

found the source. “Oh, Mummy, oh look how ugly it is!” Upon which the little girl’s mother bent down to shush her gently, and explained why it was never nice or polite to say bad things about other people, and that the little girl should show some character and apologise to the different-looking man.

The newcomer encouraged his friends to speak also, and continued asking to be let in. They agreed and joined in asking those who were close to the fence to help them, and this upset the gatekeeper.

“Why do you keep troubling the good, innocent folk of this village? They have done nothing to you,” he said.

“We only ask to be let in, good sir, perhaps if enough people hear us, one of them will,” said the newcomer.

Over the next few days, more and more people of the village heard the requests as they were going on with their fruitful day. They talked among themselves about the newcomers, and in the end decided it would be best to have a meeting with the Lord Mayor.

The meeting took place at the centre of the village, and everyone was invited, even the gatekeepers. The Lord Mayor stood on a raised platform and looked down on everyone else gathered around him. Once he was sure everyone was present, he started, “I will now call this council to order. We are here today, at this eighty-seventh gathering, considering the issue of some of our members who have happened to be near the fence, being harassed and deprived of their peaceful enjoyment of the day. It is the objective of this

meeting to find a fair and peaceable solution to this, with of course equal input from all parties.”

Mr Priest, who had once been Lord Mayor and wasn't anymore but was planning to be the mayor again, said “And you make sure that input is really equal, Justin, as I'm right here witnessing everything, unlike the last issue, I seem to remember, when I had been away.”

“Nothing unequal was done the last time, Tom, just as it will not be right now, despite what you may think, so you may rest assured,” said the Lord Mayor.

Martha cleared her throat, “The newcomers have been requesting my daughter to assist the gatekeeper in accessing the door of the fence to permit entry,” she said in one breath, then gulped for air, glad to have spoken up.

“You know I will never do such a thing, sir, not without direct orders from you,” said the gatekeeper immediately. “It's why I'm eager for today's decision, perhaps more so than anyone else.”

“Why are the newcomers here?” asked Geoff, an honest man who loved working with wood in his carpentry and was genuinely curious. Phil the dentist rolled his eyes before answering “Well, why would they not be here? Look around you, my man. Our trees and plants yield twice a year, our cows give milk endlessly, our houses are sturdy, we have a good mayor (Mr Priest grumbled at this), nobody steals or murders, and we all do what we want to do, everything is as it should be. Of course they want to come here.”

“So can we permit access then?” asked Natalie,

who was ten years old and had seen the newcomers talking to her parents through a gap between the planks. The Lord Mayor turned to lawyer Albert, who came forward with the legal books in his hand. "I'm terribly afraid there is a problem. There is nothing in here about newcomers or permission or access."

"Oh but surely there must be something there that accepted the past newcomers!" said Anastasia. The Lord Mayor nodded, and the others whispered among themselves. Why, yes, they did remember other newcomers in the past having been allocated. They had looked, talked, and cooked like them. Nobody could point them out today. Some of them had had children who'd only ever known the village.

"That was rather a long time ago, ladies and gentlemen," explained lawyer Albert with great patience. "It was a different time, it is an altogether separate issue that confronts us today."

"In all fairness, Albert, I do need to consider, does anyone possess any divergent views on this?" asked the Lord Mayor.

"I am shocked and appalled at all of you," said a booming voice, and everyone knew who it belonged to – the respected Tara, who strode majestically up to the raised platform with the rest of her supporters. Tara enjoyed a very special position in the village. She was one of the very few who did not have to work for a living, as she claimed her real purpose was to observe and comment on things that happened in the village. Her contributions in the past had been significant, and the crowd parted

to let her majestic bearing through.

“There is nothing wrong with their request,” she pronounced heavily, so as to make even the Lord Mayor quake a little. “We have acquiesced to such requests before, and we can do so again,” and she stood with such great conviction that it must have been infectious, for some of the villagers around her nodded to themselves as well.

“Now, now, just you wait there,” said Mr Priest, and Tara’s companions groaned aloud. “Just because you say this, doesn’t mean it can be done. Sure, we as the lovely village, proud of our equality, want to do the right thing, but just as we have faith that we have such a fine workable system in Albert’s lawbooks, so must we also abide by it to guide us to the right decision.”

There were some murmurs of approval at this, even a “hear, hear,” and even the Lord Mayor was moved enough to dip his head a couple of times in agreement.

“It is a faulty system!” cried Tara, and her minions took the call up, repeating it several times to those around them. Instead of the electrifying effect Tara had depended on to keep Tara as Tara all this time, the rest just seemed disgruntled.

“Don’t fault the system,” said Nathan.

“It is a good system,” said Charles.

“The system has never failed us,” croaked old Paul.

“The system is responsible for what we are,” said Margaret, who received a chorus of approval.

“The system *is* responsible for us,” said Tara, changing tracks instantly. “It should also provide

for the newcomers then.”

“I’m absolutely assured it does,” said lawyer Albert, as if given a personal challenge. “The system functions for the protection of the village at all costs.”

“Exactly, Albert,” the Lord Mayor interjected, “the village needs to be protected. It has been protected all this while, which is how we constructed everything and everyone equal, and we are so proud of it, and that’s the truth.”

“Hear, hear.”

“Well said, Lord Mayor.”

Tara cleared her throat, not so majestic anymore. “All I’m saying,” she said slowly, “is to include newcomers in the system.”

“Well, yes,” said young Sue, with some exasperation, “but how many are we talking?”

“Only the most deserving ones,” said David.

“Only those who understand our system,” said Louise.

“And follow the rules,” said George.

“And don’t do unequal things,” said Desmond.

“Are there many of them?” asked Cheryl, and even the Lord Mayor blinked, not having thought of this.

“Too many, too many,” said old Paul. “How will we hold them?”

“We will then no longer be us,” said Aunt Bertha.

“We need self-protection,” echoed Jay.

“We must follow the system for our protection,” agreed Claire.

“I am afraid, Lord Mayor,” said Agatha, stepping

forward towards the dais, past Tara. "I am afraid what we truly need is proper protection for us to be us, and this is dire, and urgent, and we don't know if you can see that, sir."

"That's right," said Mr Priest. "This is unequivocal evidence of very poor leadership, and I applaud the people of this village for seeing that so quickly and – "

"Now, now, Tom," said the Lord Mayor. "It has long been known that I work only to serve the village, that is by the system and the people know I follow the system. It is how we practice our equality, which makes this the place we are so proud of, and that is the truth. And if it's protection that's necessary, then protection it is."

When the matter looked nearly settled, and the Lord Mayor could nearly give a sigh of relief, Charlotte said "However, I am doubtful, perplexed even, that we champion our protection when that fence is so rickety."

"Absolutely," said Mr Priest.

"What's wrong with the fence?" asked Tara, and only her companions could tell she was genuinely puzzled.

"Well, it says here," said lawyer Albert, with a quiet triumph, "that it is to protect the fragile perfection of this village."

"It can't do that the way it is right now," said old Paul. "There are way too many gaps and cracks, which show us the outside."

"And they show our inside the other way too," observed Mary with gravity, and there was much nodding.

“So it is established,” said Mr Priest with authority, interrupting Tara, who had begun to speak. “What we need to do immediately – ”

“ – is board up the fence, to make it stronger,” finished the Lord Mayor, hurrying to get ahead of Mr Priest.

“Hear, hear.”

“Keep our equality safe.”

“Let’s protect ourselves!”

Tara, try as she might, could not get a word in edgeways, even as she knew this meant her role would remain necessary for still a while.

And so the villagers worked together, in blissful harmony, in perfect symphony, to strengthen the fence that gave the village and its equality such beautiful protection. The carpenter had the wood and nails and tools, the painter had paint, and the welder brought especial delight when he offered some of his expensive metals, and he and the blacksmith inserted durable sheets of steel and aluminium. They even inserted strong metal nuts and bolts on the door the gatekeeper used to let the villagers in and out, so that the entry and exit would be smoother. Tara and her companions didn’t help, but knew they didn’t need to, because their role was still valid and required in the village. It was a great day of co-operation, sharing, and mutual understanding. They all then went home to celebrate in quiet joy. There had been a peaceable outcome, everyone was still the same, everyone was equal and proud and happy, and that is the truth.

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