

28 YEARS A BACHELOR

by

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Prologue

Note: Glossary At End

Gopanpally Village

“Get up, get up.”

Madhav batted away the hand poking at him.

“Get up,” the voice in his ear insisted.

Madhav forced an eye open.

His grandfather grinned down at him.

Madhav propped himself up on an elbow, shook his head to dispel the grogginess and sighed. “What’s wrong now?”

“Why does something have to be wrong, you negative fellow?”

“Maybe because you’re harassing me in the middle of the night?”

“Night? *Bah!* It is practically *Brahmi muhurtam*.” Tataiyya’s eyes danced with excitement. “Up, up, up!”

A whole forty-eight minutes before sunrise. Great! Madhav slumped against the headboard. At twenty-eight years of age, and on a vacation that was way overdue, hadn’t he earned the right to sleep in? All through his school years his father had woken him up at *Brahmi muhurtam*, lecturing that what Madhav learned at this hour would stay with him for life. Now he knew who was to blame. “Tataiyya, it’s the middle of the night. Can’t you come back at a more reasonable hour? Say noon?”

“Complaining so much? A young, strong boy like you? *Cha!*”

Like that eight-hour motorbike ride from Hyderabad yesterday wasn't enough, immediately upon arrival he'd escorted his pregnant sister to the doctor. After helping his grandparents settle in after their own trip, he had hit the bed only past midnight.

Madhav collapsed on the pillow. “Tataiyya, it is nowhere close to dawn. Even the birds are taking it easy.”

If Tataiyya had been young enough to dance from foot to foot, he might have. Instead he leaned forward, rubbing his palms together in glee. “Good things are about to happen!”

Greater men had succumbed in the face of Tataiyya's dogged persistence. Madhav sighed in defeat. “Give me ten minutes.”

When he stumbled on to the veranda, his grandmother was already seated.

“Madhav's also here,” Nainamma said. “So what's the big fuss?”

Tataiyya raised a finger, then dialled on his mobile phone. “How much longer?” His head bounced like a spring-loaded neck atop a cheap, throwaway pen. Hanging up, he grinned.

“You woke me up to practice on your mobile phone?” Madhav groaned.

“*Bah!* You had to inherit your grandmother's pleasant disposition!”

Nainamma snorted.

Madhav's sister, Jaya, yawned as she made her way to the empty armchair.

“So what's the big surprise?” Madhav asked.

“If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?” He tapped a foot impatiently, looking at his watch every few seconds, putting it to his ear to make sure it still worked.

Nainamma sighed at her husband and pushed a footrest in Jaya's direction.

Thanking her grandmother with a smile, Jaya put her feet up and lay back in the armchair. Putting a hand to her back, she groaned. Back pain had been her constant companion during pregnancy.

“Sorry, child, for getting you up so early,” Tataiyya said. He flicked a finger at Madhav. “Not you.” He turned back to Jaya. “Just you. But it will be worth it. Trust me.”

Madhav lay back on the swing and closed his eyes. He was getting too old for Tataiyya's antics. Hopefully Jaya's new baby would soon occupy all of his grandfather's

attention.

A horn tooted. Madhav opened his eyes in time to see Tataiyya bounding down the veranda steps. His grandfather had much more energy than a seventy-year-old ought to have – the man was loping across the walled-in mud-packed courtyard, to the gate.

Curious, Madhav sat up to watch.

The door of the taxi opened. Tataiyya helped an elderly lady out. There was animated discussion between the two. As the driver grabbed a suitcase from the taxi, Tataiyya held out his arm. With Tataiyya's support the lady crossed the courtyard and started to climb the four steps that led up to the veranda.

Jaya asked, "Who is she?"

Nainamma peered in the early dawn and shrugged.

The lady was clad in a white cotton sari, the loose end of it wrapped around her shoulders and over her shaved head. White ceremonial ash, the *vibhuti*, streaked across her forehead. She walked up the stairs, holding a palm to her chest to ease her breath. Once on the veranda, she slowly turned to where Nainamma stood. She looked at Nainamma, then back at Tataiyya. Tataiyya nodded in quick jerky motions, his eyes gleaming.

The lady looked at Nainamma, her eyes filling. "*Chelli?*"

Nainamma's face drained of colour.

The other lady made no attempt to stem her tears.

"No!" Nainamma whispered hoarsely. "Can't be." She looked at Tataiyya.

He nodded.

Madhav got to his feet, as did Jaya. They looked at each other in puzzlement.

Nainamma's hand trembled.

Tataiyya beamed.

Nainamma took a step forward, then two. "*Akka?*" she said, voice hoarse.

When the lady nodded, the two women fell into each other's arms and burst into tears.

Madhav and Jaya exchanged puzzled glances as the ladies held each other and wept. Tataiyya continued to beam. A good five minutes later, the two ladies separated, Nainamma's arm wrapped around the older lady.

The older lady touched Nainamma's face gently, both ladies watery-eyed.

"And what have we here?" the elderly lady asked.

"My grandson, Madhav, and granddaughter, Jaya," Nainamma said, her voice shaking with emotion.

The older lady motioned the two forward. When they bent in unison to touch her feet, she put a hand on Jaya's shoulder to prevent her from bending because of the pregnancy. She placed her hand on their heads, then traced their faces with trembling hands.

"Nainamma?" Madhav was shaken to see his grandmother this emotional.

Nainamma cleared her throat. "My sister."

"What?" Madhav said, taken aback. "I didn't even know you had a sister. A living one, that is."

"We've been trying for years to find her. I never thought I'd see her again." She looked at Tataiyya in deep gratitude.

Tataiyya squirmed in discomfort.

"How come you didn't recognize her?"

"She's grown old since the last time I saw her."

The other lady laughed shakily, cupping Nainamma's cheek. "Look at you, you young thing."

"When was the last time you saw each other?" Jaya asked.

"Sixty years ago."

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"Come," Nainamma said, holding a hand out to her sister. "I'll get you something to eat while you freshen up."

The taxi driver gawked as Tataiyya went down the steps. "Your wife hasn't seen her sister in sixty years?"

Tataiyya nodded as he peeled off notes to pay the other man.

"Sixty years?" The driver counted the notes and looked up. "But how is that possible?"

"She's been living in Kashi. It took me all these years to track her down."

"How did you manage that?"

“I got a sixth class kid to do internet for me. Luckily he was able to find her.”

Someone in the car tooted the horn. The driver looked back, torn between curiosity and the need to leave. The horn sounded again. Sighing, he walked down the stairs, alternately looking over his shoulder, and shaking his head.

Madhav paced about on the veranda. “So what’s the story?”

“All in good time.”

“You have the patience of a bumble bee, and you want me to be patient?”

“Watch it, grandson. Your manners aren’t ageing in proportion to your body.”

Madhav rolled his eyes.

Tataiyya waggled his eyebrows and grinned.

Chapter 1

Madhav's Office, Hyderabad, 6 months ago

“Why you not visiting to your grandfather?” Lingam *garu* asked.

Madhav didn't sigh, but oh, he wanted to. Since his grandfather's friend had taken a correspondence course in spoken English, a whole new world had opened up. Not that Madhav begrudged Lingam *garu* his newly acquired talent, but why did he persist in torturing the tongue when both men spoke perfectly fine Telugu?

“Job is taxing?” Lingam *garu* asked. “I can help?”

Madhav shook his head.

More recently Lingam *garu* had discovered the world of IGNOU – the Indira Gandhi National Open University. He was on a mission to learn as many things as he could. Last heard, the older man was taking a course in nautical sciences, though what he would do with this knowledge in their land-locked village of Gopanpally, Madhav hadn't a clue.

Lingam *garu* waved the documents. “Good thing I am taking legal-type course.”

Okay, add ‘legal-type’ to the list.

“Now I am like lawyer only, no? Very useful in village. See, I am making official papers for your grandfather.” He thrust the documents under Madhav's nose.

Madhav grabbed Lingam *garu*'s hand before he went cross-eyed. In Lingam *garu*'s defence the documents *had* been typed up on a fifty-rupee stamp paper and duly attested by a gazetted officer.

Lingam *garu* snatched his hand back. Picking up the moon-shaped reading glasses hanging from a string around his neck, he placed them on his barely-there nose, giving him the appearance of an overindulged child. “I, Sri. V. V. S. S. Koteswara Rao, aged grandfather to Madhav, hereby instructing to my grandson, vide document number 112/A/X, to presenting himself in house number 1-2-3/3/2/10/A/C-339 in Gopanpally village of Bhadra *Taluka* with immediate effect. Talking property matters. Ver-rry urgent.”

Lingam *garu* had the key legal words down all right – ‘vide, hereby, with immediate effect.’

“Good, no?” Lingam *garu* beamed.

Must have copied it from some Government of India circular, in triplicate, with two carbon papers inserted for good measure.

“Tataiyya has lived in that house for what, seventy years now? What could be so urgent?”

“When coming to village?”

“I need a stronger reason if I’m to take time off.” Madhav dropped his chin to his chest, trying to loosen the muscles in his neck. The perk of having a high-salaried, prestigious job was that he was always stressed for time. As if on cue, his manager poked his head through the door of Madhav’s office.

“Document’s due, you know.” The manager looked disapproving as he eyed Lingam *garu*.

The man had emailed Madhav at 11:30 the previous night and expected a turn-around on a project which ideally needed a week to finish. Suppressing a sigh, Madhav nodded.

Lingam *garu* grinned at the manager’s retreating back. “I got beauty legal language, no?”

Madhav picked up the sponge stress-ball on his table and squeezed it. A pulse began to tick in his jaw. “Beauty. Very beauty.” He bent forward, palms joined together in entreaty. “Please don’t think anything, but if I do not get back to work, my manager is going to throw me out of my job.” Lingam *garu* had been in Madhav’s office for the better part of an hour, after all.

“When you visiting to grandfather and talking property matters?”

“Not any time soon, unfortunately.”

The spherical little man wiggled in his chair, trying to find a comfortable position. “You youngsters. No time for anyone only. The old people, they wait, wait, wait. When they expire, grandchildren will come weeping.”

Great, now he was being emotionally blackmailed by his grandfather's sidekick.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Why you not come to village and talk to grandfather? You are not showing yourself for long, long time.”

“I was there less than four months ago. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the chicken caper?” Madhav snickered. Neither man, Tataiyya or Lingam *garu*, had experience buying chickens or eggs, or eating them for that matter, but they had taken a lofty mission upon themselves – to purchase egg-laying chickens and donate them to the local orphanage. It was the district joke that the men had returned with fifty male ones.

Lingam *garu* glowered.

“Well . . . I do have *Sankranthi* holidays coming up.”

“One-months-and-half *too too too* far away!”

“That’s the best I can do. I’ll take the entire week off. At least I’ll spend a chunk of time with my grandparents. Not the one day in-and-out I typically do when I have to swoop in and rescue the two of you. From yourselves, I might add.” He gave Lingam *garu* a pointed look, which the older man pointedly ignored.

Lingam *garu* slid forward in his chair, preparing to launch himself out of it. “*Vo-khay*,” he said, adding flair to the otherwise bland ‘okay.’ “*Sankranthi* festival time very auspicious, yes? And January not cold for city peoples, yes?”

“Err . . . yes. Everything else is well?”

“Just finished shrimp growing course.”

“But you’re vegetarian.”

Lingam *garu* gave him an open-mouthed how-does-that-matter look. “Taking motorcycle maintenance course next.”

“Correspondence?” Madhav asked blandly.

“How else? I’m some low-class fellow that I’ll learn in mechanic shop?” He sniffed. “You bringing your sister?”

“Her in-laws. You know they probably won’t give their permission. But I’ll be there.”

Lingam *garu*’s face fell for a moment, then brightened. “Okay, okay. Very okay.” Lingam *garu* waddled forward like the rotating middle of a cement mixer.

That didn’t seem to require a response, so Madhav touched his right palm to his chest in respect. The other man reciprocated the gesture and found his way to the door.

Chapter 2

Home of Jaya's in-laws, Hyderabad

“My brother is going to the village to visit our grandparents. For *Sankranthi*,” Jaya said hesitantly, hovering by the edge of the dining table. Her parents-in-law and husband sat eating dinner, while Jaya served the food.

Madhav watched from the cot placed against the wall as his sister pleaded her case.

“Perhaps . . . I could . . .?”

“Rice,” her father-in-law said.

Jaya hurried around the dining table with the bowl of rice, past her husband, Anant; past her mother-in-law. She served her father-in-law, adding increments till he spread a palm over his plate. He swirled in the spicy-smelling *sambar* and continued to eat.

As his face tightened in anger, Madhav worked at a bland expression, not wanting to get his sister in trouble. There was no point in asking the mother-in-law or Anant. The approval would have to come from the father-in-law.

“Nanna,” Anant said, addressing his father. “Jaya would like to go with Madhav.”

“Curd,” his father said.

As Jaya served him, Anant tried again. “Please?”

“No,” his father said, continuing to eat.

“But Nanna, Jaya has not visited her village since we got married. Her grandparents are anxious to see her. It’s been five years.”

“I know how long it’s been.” The father-in-law pushed his chair back and got up.

“Nanna!” Anant looked upset.

The father-in-law looked at his wife. “Was there anything unclear in what I said?”

She shook her head.

The father-in-law walked to the sink on the side, noisily rinsed his mouth and spat out the water. He held out a hand. Jaya was ready with the towel. He wiped his mouth, dropped the towel in his daughter-in-law’s waiting hand and moved towards the cot.

Madhav scrambled to his feet.

The father-in-law climbed onto the cot and lay down. In seconds he was snoring. His

fifteen-minute, post-lunch nap.

“All Jaya wants is to see her grandparents,” Anant said to his mother. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Instead of whiling away time wishing for frivolous things, she should pray with a clean, pure heart. She should do more fasting, go to more temples.” She looked pointedly at Jaya stomach. “Why else hasn’t God seen it fit to fill your womb, *hanh?*”

Jaya picked up her father-in-law’s plate and walked to the kitchen sink.

Madhav ground his teeth, itching to give the mother-in-law a piece of his mind, but knowing from past experience that it would backfire on his sister.

After five years of being childless Jaya claimed she was quite used to the taunts. And, if it were a choice between her mother-in-law’s taunts and her father-in-law’s remote authoritarianism, she preferred the taunts any day. As her mother-in-law and Anant finished up, Jaya added their plates to the pile of used dishes and cleared the table.

Madhav and Anant followed Jaya to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” Anant mumbled to Madhav.

Madhav worked his jaw loose. “It’s hardly your fault.”

Anant was a good man. He took care of Jaya as best as a man lacking a spine could.

“Why don’t you let me tell them?” Anant asked Jaya.

“What difference would it make?” Jaya said.

Anant’s doctor had let it slip that it was Anant’s low sperm count that was the reason for the lack of children. But all the science in the world wouldn’t convince the in-laws that her ‘barrenness’ wasn’t her fault, not that Madhav was assigning blame. He just wished Jaya’s in-laws would leave the younger couple alone.

Anant slumped against the counter as Jaya settled on the floor to eat. No one had come out and said Jaya could not sit at the dining table. But with her father-in-law lying in the cot in the narrow pathway next to the table, she hardly had a choice. This was what life had come to for his sister, Madhav thought with bitterness. Sitting on the cold kitchen floor, eating by herself.

Growing up, his baby sister had been vivacious, full of life, coddled to the point of being spoilt. Their parents had encouraged Madhav and Jaya to study well. “Work hard, otherwise you will be washing utensils for a living,” they said.

Jaya did everything right, studying diligently to be an engineer, not following the example set by her beloved older brother who studied as little as he could get away with, mostly because he was out partying with friends.

Madhav barely got decent marks, while Jaya ended up the University gold medallist. Now he had the well-paying job in an IT firm and she was the one washing utensils.

“Anant,” the imperious voice of his father called.

Anant raised a hand and pushed back his hair in a nervous gesture.

“Go,” Jaya said as she went back to eating.

Giving Madhav an apologetic look, Anant shuffled out of the room.

“I should go, too,” Madhav said. If he didn’t get out of here, he’d smash a fist in the father-in-law’s face. “Tataiyya and Nainamma will understand.” His grandparents would understand only too well how bad life was for their beloved granddaughter.

His baby sister nodded, face expressionless.

Excerpt from **28 Years A Bachelor** by *Rasana Atreya*