

TELL A THOUSAND LIES

By

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Prologue

Mallepalli Village, June 1995

I am not my husband's wife, nor my child's mother. Who, then, am I?

Chapter 1

Mallepalli Village, Dec 1986

“Good thing you aren’t pretty, Pullamma,” Lakshmi *garu* said with a laugh. “Can you imagine the headache if we had to hide you, too?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Lakshmi *garu* was here to lend moral support for my older sister’s bride-viewing, and I mustn’t forget it.

“Towering like a palm tree, you are,” she said, “and skin dark like anything.”

I wondered if ‘*garu*,’ as a term of respect, was wasted on this friend of my grandmother’s. Still. I was sixteen now. Couldn’t let words escape my mouth without proper consideration.

Lakshmi *garu* studied me for a long moment, the wide slash of her mouth disappearing into the flat rectangle of her face. Shaking her head, she turned back to my grandmother.

It couldn’t be easy for our Ammamma, saddled as she was with three orphaned granddaughters and no male support, to marry us off. If today’s alliance for Malli fell through, where would we find another family willing to accept the limited dowry we had to offer?

Of the three of us, Malli was the most beautiful. But my fraternal twin, Lata, was pretty, too; it was for this reason she’d been packed off to a relative’s house, out of sight of the groom’s family. For, if they got it into their heads to take Lata home as their daughter-in-law, it would be hard for us to refuse them. Given that Malli was the best-looking, it was unlikely, but why take the risk? If they chose Lata over Malli, forever people would think there was some defect in Malli that had caused the groom’s family to reject her. Who would marry her then?

Now, as Ammamma, Lakshmi *garu* and I waited for the prospective bridegroom’s family to grace us with their presence and decide if our Malli was good enough for them, I surveyed our walled-off rectangular courtyard. Our house was a series of rooms lining the back of our courtyard, one opening into the next, like the compartments of a train. A veranda separated the rooms from the courtyard. Perpendicular to it was our cowshed. On

either side of the cowshed were a tamarind tree and a *sampangi* tree. A coconut tree drooped against the far end.

Lakshmi *garu* was settled next to the *sampangi* tree, on a straw mat laid out on the mud floor. It was against this tree I sat, as I made my promise to Goddess Durga – if this alliance went through, I'd break coconuts at her altar.

That got me thinking. How many coconuts would it take to appease the Goddess? Two? Five? Twenty? Two seemed a little . . . miserly. This was bride-viewing, not some silly plea to have a cute boy smile at me. But, if I promised too much and couldn't deliver, the wrath of the Goddess would surely befall me. Even more important, if Ammamma were forced to pay for twenty coconuts out of our meagre household income, *she* would strike me dead. Five seemed safer all around.

"Pullamma," Ammamma said, interrupting my internal debate. "They should have been here twenty minutes ago. Go over to the post office and keep a watch for them."

The only way into the village was past the post office, so I sprang to my feet.

"Let the girl be," Lakshmi *garu* said. "How can they come here so soon? That, too, after travelling all night? They need time to freshen up, don't they?"

I flopped back on the ground.

"Pullamma!" Ammamma said reprovably.

I sighed, carefully arranging my half-sari over my feet. Remembering to be ladylike wasn't as easy as it sounded.

Lakshmi *garu*'s sons were to pick the groom's family up at the railway station and take them to their relatives' house. There the visitors would take their baths, have breakfast, and don their finery before coming over to view the bride.

Ammamma face's reflected the tensions of the past few days. She stood, hands on hips, eyes locked on the narrow courtyard gate built into our compound wall.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, sit down." Lakshmi *garu* patted the straw mat. "It is hurting my neck to look up at you."

Ammamma sighed. She sank onto the mat, taking care not to wrinkle her orange silk sari. She fanned herself with a palm-leaf, despite the chill of the winter morning. Her eyes remained on the gate.

"At least the walls appear new," I said, proud that I'd helped make the house so

festive.

Ammamma gave me a distracted smile. She had done her part by getting the vegetable seller to whitewash the walls of our house in return for a whole year's worth of homemade mango pickle. But I'd been the one to make the intricate *muggu* pattern on the courtyard floor, blending white rice flour with coloured chalk. I'd also been the one to apply a fresh coat of cow dung to the courtyard walls in an effort to gloss over the cracks. Now the walls looked almost new. But what I was most proud of were the flowers strung across our doorways – bright orange marigolds and pure white jasmines.

I'd risen before dawn to visit the wholesale flower market with Murty *garu*, husband of Lakshmi *garu*. Women were already streaming into the tight lanes, huge wicker baskets balanced on their heads and hips, the overflowing flowers a stunning contrast to the dusty by-lanes.

After the women settled alongside the road, squatting next to their baskets, Murty *garu* and I walked past, picking a small basket of flowers here, a length of woven flowers – measured from finger-tip to elbow – there.

If my efforts helped Amamma get a granddaughter married off, I'd be forever grateful to Goddess Durga. I felt a pang at the thought of sweet Malli getting married and going off to her in-laws' home. Then it would be Lata's turn. Soon, I'd be the only one left. Oh well, at least I'd have Amamma.

A fragrant yellow-green flower floated down in the gentle breeze. Amamma reached for it and shredded its rubbery petals, her eyes fixed on the gate. The cow mooed, startling her. "Where are these people?" she asked again.

This event was all we had talked about, planned for and worked around for two whole weeks; actually all our lives. Amamma had high hopes for this alliance. The marriage broker had assured her the groom's family was more concerned about the colour of Malli's skin than the size of her dowry.

This lack of interest in dowry was of particular worry to Amamma. "My Malli is a gem, no doubt, but why are they settling for less?"

For Lakshmi *garu*, the most suspicious part was the marriage broker's assurance that the dowry demands would be quite reasonable. "I just hope the boy doesn't have some disease they're hiding," she said.

Lakshmi *garu* was a great one at being supportive.

“If he limps or something, I’m okay,” Ammamma said. “But anything more serious...”

Impatient at the delay, I jumped to my feet.

“Pullamma,” Ammamma said sharply, “don’t forget to be ladylike.”

Nodding, I hurried through the gate to the post office on the other side of the village square.

The post office was a tiny, airless room which the postmaster rarely used; most days, he was to be found at his desk under the tamarind tree. Today, Murty *garu* was seated on a metal folding chair next to the postmaster, facing a line of squatting villagers. Letter reading was, of course, the job of the postmaster, but Murty *garu* pitched in whenever he could.

While Murty *garu* read a letter out loud to an elderly man, the postmaster was busy writing a letter on behalf of Lakshmi *garu*’s neighbour, a young woman whose husband had migrated to the city in search of work. He leaned forward, his ink-stained fingers tapping on the sun-dappled desk. “Do you want to tell your husband that your Chitti lost her first tooth?”

The woman nodded.

The postmaster bent forward and scribbled.

“About your mother-in-law’s fainting spell?”

She nodded again.

“What about the child that is coming? You haven’t given him the news, have you?”

The woman covered the lower half of her face with her sari and giggled.

“They’re coming, they’re coming,” a hoarse voice shouted.

I flushed with excitement.

A couple of labourers, cotton towels wound around their heads to prevent sweat from dripping into their eyes, ran up the dusty road, heralding the arrival of the groom’s family.

Murty *garu* looked up from the letter he was reading out loud and smiled apologetically at the old man squatting across from him. “I’m an elder at the bride-viewing for Pullamma’s sister.”

“Please, do go,” the old man said, reaching for his letter. “This can wait.” He went over to squat in the line awaiting the postmaster’s attention.

I ran back to the house, trying not to trip over my half-sari. “They’re coming, they’re coming!”

Ammamma didn’t even scold me for my unladylike haste. She hurried to the gate with Lakshmi *garu*, just as Lakshmi *garu*’s two sons drove up in their shiny new tractor. An older man, most likely the groom’s father, sat in the front, a child in his arms. A couple of men stood on the sideboards, clinging wherever they could get a hold. The rest of the groom’s party was squashed up on the rug laid on the floor of the trailer. The tractor belched fumes of diesel and shuddered to a halt.

Across the road, all activity stopped. People turned to inspect the commotion. I puffed with pride.

Murty *garu* greeted our honoured guests, palms of his hands joined together. “*Namaskaram!* I hope your travel was comfortable.”

“The train was late,” the groom’s mother said, as Murty *garu* helped her down. Being the mother of the groom, this was her chance to complain, and she did. “On top of it, we couldn’t get seats in Second Class. So we had to travel like some low class people, no reservation, no nothing. Had to sit up all night on a suitcase. Now my back is paining me and my leg is swollen.” Her voice quavered. “My head is pounding so hard, I might have to cancel today’s bride-viewing.”

Ammamma clapped her mouth in dismay. “Please, I beg you, don’t even *think* such a thing. What will people say if the bride-viewing party turns back? They’ll blame my Malli’s bad fate, is what they will do. Who will marry her, then?”

“I’m at your command,” Murty *garu* said. “Anything to help.”

“Can you arrange for medicine?” the groom’s father said.

“Right away.” Murty *garu* flicked a finger at his younger son, who took off at a run in the direction of the xerox-cum-medical shop.

“These trains,” the groom’s father said, “they should have a lot more compartments. So many people travelling, no? The Railway Minister should do more for the interior villages. We travelled all night, no rest, no place to sit. General Compartment. Just imagine!” He nodded at the child in his arms. “And with my grandson, too.”

“So much headache merely to view the bride?” Murty *garu* shook his head in tandem with his raised hand, a what-is-this-world-coming-to look on his face.

The next to alight had to be the groom. In his early twenties, he seemed an agreeable fellow, of medium height and complexion, though on the skinny side. He bent at the waist to touch Ammamma’s feet, then touched his fingers to his eyes in respect.

Well brought up, too. I hoped things worked out today. Malli and he would make a cute couple.

Kondal Rao *garu*, husband of Ammamma’s friend Suseela *garu*, and honoured guest, was due anytime now, so our party of twenty waited by the courtyard gate. Murty *garu*’s son, back from the medical shop, handed the medicine and a glass of water to the groom’s mother. She drank the water, and dropped the medicine in her purse.

Since the groom’s family was from Kondal Rao *garu*’s village, my grandmother had sought him out to make inquiries about the family. Before we could allow our Malli to be married into their family, we had to ensure that the groom was of good character, and his clan respectable, hadn’t we? We were lucky that Kondal Rao *garu* had personally vouched for the groom’s family.

Weren’t we?

I felt a frisson of fear. What if Jhampaiah, the day labourer, were right? What then?

That day, from two months ago, was still clear in my mind.

When the marriage broker brought news about this alliance, Jhampaiah was perched high up on the coconut tree in our courtyard.

“Welcome,” Ammamma said, smiling. The marriage broker was a most favoured visitor. “Please freshen up. So hot, isn’t it?”

To me, Ammamma said, “Pullamma, pour out some buttermilk.”

The marriage broker, a skinny woman with bulging eyes and sloped chin, slipped out of her footwear and walked over to the three-foot cemented square in one corner of the courtyard. Pumping the hand-pump till water gushed out, she washed her face first, then her feet. Wiping her face with the free end of her sari, she settled on the straw mat. “I have just the alliance for you,” she said.

I handed her a glass of buttermilk.

“Who is the family?”

“You won’t believe it.” The broker’s tone held reverence.

“Who?”

“The father of the groom is the right hand man of Kondal Rao *garu* himself.”

“My Malli is favoured, indeed!” Ammamma raised her joined palms above her head, eyes shining. “Kondal Rao *garu*’s wife is my childhood friend. We couldn’t get a better alliance if we tried.”

Crash! A semi-circular knife buried itself at the base of the coconut tree.

Ammamma jerked her head up at Jhampaiah, balanced high up our tree, legs wrapped around the skinny trunk.

He looked down at the fallen knife in dismay.

Ammamma shook a fist at him. “What if someone had been standing below?”

Jhampiah shimmied down the tree and shuffled up to Ammamma, head hanging.

“What is done, is done,” Ammamma said. “Just be more careful the next time.”

He nodded vigorously.

“Did you pluck the coconuts?”

Jhampiah nodded again and started to shove the coconuts into a gunny bag. He had been hired to strip the tree of the coconuts. He’d sell them for Ammamma and take a commission for himself. After the coconuts were put away, he squatted next to the gunny bag, focussing his unblinking gaze on Ammamma.

“What?” Ammamma said.

Jhampiah shook his head.

The marriage broker laughed. “Must be waiting for me to leave so he can discuss his petty little issues with you.” She pointed her sloped chin at Jhampaiah, the hairs on it glistening. “*Peetha kashtalu peethavi*,” she quoted in our native Telugu, reducing his concerns to those of a mere crab.

The broker drained her glass, walked to the cemented square which also served as a wash area, and put the buttermilk glass down. “I will set up the bride-viewing, then.”

Ammamma joined her palms together in farewell. “That would be good.”

The marriage broker let herself out of the courtyard.

As soon as the woman closed the gate behind her, Jhampaiah joined the palms of his hands in entreaty. “Please don’t take offence. I am talking out of turn.” Sweat beaded his

upper lip.

“Speak freely.”

“Don’t go with the alliance.”

I was startled. “But why?”

Ignoring me, he leaned forward, the cords in his neck straining. “There is lot of talk about Kondal Rao *garu*. Bad talk.”

“*Bah!*” Ammamma reached for a coconut frond broom. “For this you made so much drama? Go to the market and sell your coconuts. Leave the thinking to me.”

He got to his feet and slung the gunny bag over his shoulder. At the gate, he turned. “*Amma garu*, I beg you, don’t dismiss this so casually.”

Ammamma waved him away.

He scurried out, a frightened look on his face.

“These people,” Ammamma said, sweeping the debris from the coconuts. “They have no education, no understanding. With my fifth class education, I’ll need him to tell me right from wrong? I’ll be scared of my own friend’s husband, or what?”

Chapter 2

Almost everything in my past foretold my ordinariness in a family of extraordinary beauties – my unspectacular horoscope, the positioning of the stars at the time of my birth, even the inauspicious start to my life.

“How could a child so . . . ordinary-looking possibly be mine?” my father is said to have exclaimed moments after my birth, a frown marring his extraordinarily handsome face.

“Donkey’s egg,” Ammamma said with uncharacteristic rudeness towards a son-in-law of the family. “Whoever heard of a newborn being beautiful?”

But this was exactly the excuse he was looking for. Our mother had died in childbirth minutes after delivering us twin girls. This, after she’d already burdened our father with an older daughter. Had any of us been born the right gender, with the consequent ability to take care of our father in his old age, this question of paternity would have never come up. With no son and no wife, he felt justified in discarding us and taking on a new life.

Ammamma stepped in after the abandonment, not that she had much of a choice; my father had no family. Who else would take on the headache of raising, and marrying off, three girls? Other than a grandmother, that is.

My twin and I remained nameless for almost a year after our birth, a period of intense agonizing for my grandmother. She finally settled on Pullamma – twig girl – for me, the older twin. To bestow a fancier name would be to risk the wrath of the Gods, the current misfortunes being more than she could bear. She debated on Pichamma – mad girl – for my twin; the Gods must have been smiling on my sister because they intervened in the form of Ammamma’s mother-in-law. The old lady decreed that it was only proper that such a fair and pretty child be named after her. So my twin ended up being named Lata.

Fair-skinned Lata was as delicate as the creeper she was named for, while our older sister Malli, with her pinkish-white complexion, couldn’t be more flower-like if she tried.

All through childhood, I was teased mercilessly for my name. I was more a branch

than a twig; a stump really, and the other children never let me forget it. They called me *Nalla Pulla* – black twig – for the colour of my skin. I swore when I had children of my own, I would give them the most beautiful names possible.

Many years later, when I did have my child, that choice would not be mine to make.

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My grandmother was an elegant lady. Not very tall, but of fair skin. In her youth, she'd been as slender as Lata, though over the years gravity had caused her body to settle mainly around her hips. So renowned were her dowry, and her beauty, that her hand in marriage was sought far and wide. After great consideration, Ammamma's father settled on an alliance with my grandfather.

"The only bad decision my father ever made in his life," Ammamma said with a shake of the head. "Such a good man my father was, with complexion like fresh fruit, and on top of it – honourable like anything."

Everything my grandfather wasn't. Post-wedding, he gave up his prestigious *tahsildar* job; none of that tax collection business for him. Instead, he efficiently worked his way through Ammamma's not insubstantial dowry, along with most of his own inheritance before he passed on from drinking country liquor. Ammamma was forced to sell off much of her jewellery to marry off her four daughters, and would have been living on some Brahmin's charity, but for the fact my grandfather hadn't been able to sell his ancestral home from under her before he joined his ancestors in the heavens above. Then our mother died, and our father departed to find God in the Himalayas.

Losing her daughter to childbirth, and her son-in-law to irresponsibility, Ammamma had tough decisions to make.

A few years after she inherited us, the village elders stepped in to counsel. "Your oldest and youngest granddaughters are pleasing to the eye," they told Ammamma. "It will be easy enough to find good matches for them, even considering your limited dowry giving ability."

"What about my Pullamma?" Ammamma asked, distressed.

"You need to be practical, Seetamma," the elders said. "She has neither the looks, nor the dowry. Keep her at home. After all, you will need someone to tend to you in your old age."

“But who will provide for her when I am gone? Who will help her in her old age, I ask you?”

But the village elders had done their duty by the poor widow. They had dispensed the best possible advice. Having no answers to Amamma’s questions, they joined the palms of their hands in farewell and took leave.

Amamma was angry, but Lakshmi *garu* believed their advice to be sound. “Pullamma is like a palm tree, bending over with her height. Hurts my neck to look up at her. That mole below her nose. And dark like anything. Be realistic. Where will you get a groom tall enough for her? And more importantly, how will you find enough dowry to take her off your hands?”

After daily discourses by Lakshmi *garu* on the rightness of this course of action, this began to make perfect sense to all concerned – me included. There was no question that Lata and Malli stood better chances of making good matches than I. Lata had inherited our mother’s delicate build and flashing cat eyes, while Malli was blessed with a combination of Amamma’s and our father’s best features.

I got the leftovers.

I resigned myself to my fate.

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Though the village elders and Lakshmi *garu* had given up on my marital prospects, Amamma hadn’t. Not until the day of Malli’s bride-viewing, anyway.

Amamma worried about what would happen to me after she passed away. What protection would I have in society without a husband? What respect? Without the sanctity of the wedding *pustela taadu* around my neck, I would be excluded from everything a married woman was entitled to – the festivals, the social functions, the right to hold my head high in society.

I shuddered to think I might end up like Shantamma, that old hag who squatted by her front door all day, shaking clenched fists at the children who giggled at her as they passed by.

The village elders had told Amamma often enough that a girl was someone else’s property, her father’s home being a transitional place for her. Tradition decreed the role of a girl’s birth family was to nurture her, get her married, and send her off to her

husband's home. It would be many years before it occurred to me that if my birth home was not mine, and my married home was my in-laws', which was the house I could expect to claim?

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"Malli, I don't worry about," Ammamma said to her friend, Lakshmi *garu*, as she oiled my hair under the warm winter sun. She sat behind me on a straw mat in the middle of our courtyard. "Lata is also pretty enough. It is only this one." She thumped the back of my head with the flat of her palm, causing my head to hit my upraised knee.

"Ammamma!" It made me weary, this endless marriage-prospects discussion in our women-only household.

Ammamma massaged my head so vigorously, my teeth rattled.

"Like the other problems in my cursed life weren't enough, I made the blunder of sending this one and Lata to school all the way to 12th class. Just because that fool of a headmaster was after my blood."

"And look where it got you," Lakshmi *garu* said.

"Fanciful notions," Ammamma said. "He isn't the one with overeducated, unmarried girls on his hands."

I tried to keep my sigh inaudible.

Lata looked up from her book.

Malli continued weaving the jasmines into a garland.

Lakshmi *garu* settled on another mat, straw tray in hand. She peered intently at the rice, picking out stones. "These ration shop fellows, such cheats they are, Seetamma. Must be adding at least a quarter kilo of stones to each bag of rice."

I leaned back against Ammamma's knee and slowly closed my eyes, breathing in the odour of Parachute coconut hair oil. I must have lurched forward because it caused Ammamma to pull hard on my hair.

"Ow," I yelped.

Ammamma was too steamed to notice my distress. "Lata passed her 12th class in distinction," she said, stressing the word 'distinction' like it was deserving of particular disgust. "Can you believe it?"

Lata made a face.

I felt a tug of satisfaction. I might have passed 12th class, too, but at least I had the good sense not to do well.

Ammamma continued, “With such good marks, how am I to find her a suitable groom, I ask you?”

“At least Malli was smart enough not to study too much,” Lakshmi *garu* said.

A smile hovered on Malli’s perfectly shaped lips.

Ammamma nodded with grim satisfaction. Malli had failed her 6th class, then refused to return to school. That suited Ammamma just fine.

“Maybe I can hide Lata’s education,” Ammamma said. From the family of the prospective groom, she meant.

“But you can’t hide Pullamma’s appearance.”

Ammamma dropped her head in her hands. “True enough.”

I considered Lakshmi *garu*’s boxy face and protruding eyes, trying to ignore the hurt. Would marriage make my lack of looks irrelevant, too?

“A little dowry will get the other two good enough grooms,” Lakshmi *garu* said. “They are pretty enough. But this one...” She inspected my face, one feature at a time, face devoid of hope.

In spite of myself, I laughed. Lakshmi *garu* could be such a drama queen.

Ammamma set aside the bottle of hair oil and nudged me to a sitting position. She started to braid, each pull on the hair jerking my head backward.

Lakshmi *garu* went back to her rice picking. “If you had a husband or a son, even a grandson to support you . . .”

“Such is my fate, Lakshmi,” Ammamma said, slapping her forehead with the palm of her hand. “People are already asking me to give Lata in marriage. If I can’t get this one married off” – thump on my back for emphasis – “how long will I be able to keep a younger granddaughter at home?”

My sister, Lata, was a whole minute younger than me.

“Who will accept her then, *hanh*?” Ammamma continued in agitation. “Headmaster *garu* keeps reminding me gov’tment has set eighteen years as legal marriage age for girls. Already past puberty, my granddaughters are. Is gov’tment going to pay the larger dowries if I delay their marriages, I ask you?”

The women shared a look of commiseration.

Shaking my head, I turned my face to the sun.

Ammamma whacked the side of my head. “The winter sun will make you darker.” She bent down and kissed my forehead in remorse, her pale cheeks pink from the warming rays of the sun.

Lakshmi *garu* cocked her head and considered me for a moment, winter sun glinting off the powdered smoothness of her mud brown face. Pursing her lips she said, “Nothing will make this one pretty. But at least use one of those fairness creams. I saw on TV if you use it regularly, the girl will become fair and marriage proposals will start pouring in like anything.”

Ammamma snorted as she put a rubber band at the end of my braid. “Looting people is what they are doing. I tried and tried with that cream, but did it make her fair? On the Lord of the Seven Hills, I tell you, we’ve had to watch every *paisa* because of that cursed cream. Not to mention the money wasted on all those concoctions that quack in the village palmed off on me.” For having taken the Lord’s name in vain, Ammamma turned eastward and raised the joined palms of her hands in supplication. Not wanting to take chances, she also crossed her hands at her wrists and gave her cheeks gentle slaps. Then she held my face in her hands and sighed. “Oh Child! Why were you cursed with the colour of your wretched grandfather?”

Our grandfather, the wretched one, had been as dark as the underside of my best friend’s sooty kerosene stove. For him, skin colour wasn’t an issue; he had been able to marry the fair-skinned Ammamma, hadn’t he?

Ammamma continued, “Why couldn’t you have been fair like me, or pretty like your sisters? By now you would have been married off into a family with one tractor and two motorcycles, and lording over ten cows.”

“And heavy with your first child, too,” Lakshmi *garu* added.

Wearying of this dog-chase-tail discussion, I threaded my fingers through the looped string in my hands and pushed it up for my grandmother to see. “Look Ammamma! I made a bridge.”

Ammamma bent down and kissed my cheek. “How I shudder to think of this foolish child’s future.”

Chapter 3

I might have shared parents with Malli and Lata, but Chinni was the sister of my heart.

The twinkly-eyed Chinni, short, plump and pretty, her skin the colour of rice husk – and I dark, and tall like a bent-over palm tree – were fondly referred to as milk and coffee, both for the fact that we were always together, as well for the contrasting colours of our skin.

Chinni, Lata and I were in the same class, but it was my best friend I walked to school with, in our matching uniforms of blue pinafores, almost-white shirts and red-ribbons braided into our pigtails. Chinni and I sat cross-legged on the cemented floor of our classroom, sharing a slate, alternating the use of a slim piece of chalk and dreaming up ways to distract our Master.

“I am convinced you have a usable brain tucked away somewhere, Pullamma,” our Master said on a daily basis, clutching at his head in despair, causing Chinni and me to burst into giggles. “Always dreaming up some mischief or the other. If only you would dust it out, and put it to good use.”

But who cared? Of what use was education to girls? Would it help with cooking, or getting up to fill municipal water in the middle of the night, or dealing with mothers-in-law? We giggled and gossiped in the back row, while Lata settled up front and worked her way to the top of the class.

Our classroom was poorly lit by an overhead bulb hanging off a long, frayed electrical cord. Garden lizards darted between the cracks in the mud walls, flicking tongues, swallowing insects and providing entertainment to the class. Occasionally, after the boys had chased some poor lizard all over class, the frightened creature would make its escape, leaving behind its tail. Chinni and I stood with the boys, examining the detached tail as it writhed on the ground, while the rest of the girls squealed. Privately we thought they were a pretty silly bunch.

Chinni and I lived for such disruptions to our class. If our elders hadn't made us go to school, mainly to get us out of the way of their daily chores, we might have spent our time in more such pleasurable pursuits.

Another thing we looked forward to were the power cuts which inevitably followed rising temperatures. When the fan in our classroom shuddered to a halt, our headmaster ordered us out under the cool of the large *raavi* tree. Classes resumed, with our teacher writing on a small, portable blackboard. Many times, Chinni and I would slowly lean against the tree and wink at each other. The other children clapped their mouths at the sight of us winking, horrified at our boldness. When they started to giggle, our Master would turn around, the glare in his rheumy eyes prompting us to sit up straight. The children would laugh. Too babyish for words; but it was the best we could come up with, given what we had to play with.

To pray for frequent power cuts, Chinni and I stopped at the Durga temple before heading off to school each morning, placing a flower at the altar to bribe the Goddess. The rest of the day was spent waiting for that escape to the *raavi* tree.

This was more than Lata could bear. “Pullamma,” she said, “pray for something good. Brains, perhaps. No more mischief in class, I’m warning you. I want to do well in the exams.”

Chinni made faces behind Lata’s back. “I’m going to be a lady doctor,” she mimicked my sister in a sing song voice. “I am going to be a lady Prime Minister.”

Then she and I ran giggling, fleeing to escape Lata’s wrath.

As we got to higher classes, our headmaster began to nurture high hopes for Lata. We didn’t have any doctor in the village, let alone a lady one, so he thought it would be wonderful if she were the first. Lata had no problem with that. All she talked about was how she would walk around the village, stethoscope around her neck, tending to the sick and the powerful, the rich and the needy. When we giggled at her pomposity, Lata tossed her long braid over her shoulder, and stalked off.

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School over for the day, I settled on the tyre swing in our courtyard, watching Malli, Ammamma and Lakshmi *garu* prepare the tomato for pickling.

Using a long wooden spoon, Malli turned over the sun dried tomato marinating in sesame seed oil. “Does this need more mustard powder? A little more asafoetida and turmeric, perhaps?”

Lakshmi *garu* put some in her mouth and pursed her lips. “I think too much salt is

the problem. Add some more chilli powder to balance it.”

Ammamma made the addition and mixed it well. “Needs another day in the sun.”

Lakshmi *garu* nodded.

Dusk was approaching, so I helped Malli lug the fragile ceramic jars of pickle inside. We’d bring out the jars next morning, and open them to the sun again.

The courtyard gate rattled. The knock, this late in the evening, was as unexpected as road repairs in a non-election year.

Ammamma jerked her head up, startled.

Lata hurried forward, an expectant look on her face.

Lakshmi *garu* and Ammamma wiped their hands on their saris and got to their feet.

Malli started to sweep the courtyard.

It was the school Headmaster. When he’d been greeted and seated, Headmaster *garu* said, “Your Lata is extremely bright. I think she should study to be a doctor.”

There was stunned silence.

Lakshmi *garu* erupted into a cackle so maniacal, the birds lined up on the top of the cowshed almost tripped over themselves in their anxiety to get away.

I gave a startled laugh, never having thought Lata’s obsession more than a joke.

Malli clapped a hand over her mouth.

Headmaster *garu*’s eyes darted from Lakshmi *garu* to Ammamma, but my grandmother was of no help; she was quivering like a woman in direct contact with an exposed electrical wire. Soon the two women were clutching at their sides, gasping from laughing. “This is the best laugh I’ve had in years,” Ammamma said, when she’d regained some control.

Headmaster *garu*’s lips tightened.

Ammamma wiped away her tears with the edge of her sari. Sniffing, she said, “What is a girl to do with all that education – a doctor, no less?”

“Use it to wash her children’s backsides?” Lakshmi *garu* suggested, slapping her thigh like Duryodhana from the *Mahabharata*, laughter rumbling up her chest.

That set Ammamma off again.

Headmaster *garu* looked at the women, both of them rocking with laughter. He turned to Lata, sorrow on his face. He stalked out.

“But Ammamma –” Lata protested.

“Hush, Child,” Ammamma said. “You think that pompous fool knows better than me what’s good for you? Look at Pullamma, is she complaining?”

I shook my head vigorously. Not me. No reason to complain.

“And Malli, is she aching for education?”

Malli started to sweep energetically.

Ammamma sniffed, wiping away tears of mirth. "Him and his stupid notions. If girls study too much, they will get funny ideas in their heads. They won't do as they are told in their in-laws' home. Then what will become of our family honour, I ask you? How will we hold our heads high?"

No one but me noted the distress on Lata’s face.

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The news of Headmaster *garu*’s visit spread. The villagers shook their heads over Ammamma’s foolishness. Letting a girl study all the way up to 12th. What was she thinking? What girl ever needed to read more than an occasional letter from her husband? And if that weren’t bad enough, the foolish woman had sent Chinni and me to keep Lata company, and let me write – and pass – the exams, too. At least Chinni’s mother, though a widow herself, had the good sense not to permit any exam-taking nonsense after 7th class.

Were the villagers fools to stop this school-going foolishness for their girls before it was too late? Were they brainless to marry their daughters off before the girls got grandiose ideas fixed in their heads, and brought dishonour to their birth homes by refusing to do as told by their in-laws? The villagers tut-tutted. Leave a woman in charge and look what happened. What else could you expect when there was no firm male hand to guide the family, no husband, no son, not even a grandson?

“*Aiyyo*,” Ammamma lamented, “what have I done?”

“What is the point in regretting now,” Lakshmi *garu* said, “after the girls have slid out of your hands, and the time for reining them in is past? Going behind your back, they are, sending Headmaster *garu* to demand more education. Like you need the headache. And that Lata, not even like a normal girl. Always getting out of housework, troubling her head with a book.”

Ammamma hung her head in remorse.

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For Chinni and me, things continued as usual. We passed time telling each other ancient sayings, within Lata's hearing, of course.

“Don't tell lies,” Chinni said, her eyes twinkling in her plump face, “otherwise girls will be born to you.”

“How about this one,” I countered. “Help arrange a marriage, even if takes a thousand lies to do so.”

“So you're racking up lies?” Lata asked.

“We want to get married,” Chinni said, her face angelic. “Don't you?”

“How can you think so little of yourself?” Lata demanded, head inclined in that imperious way of hers, making us giggle even more.

“Don't you have anything better to do in life than giggle?”

“We tell lies, too,” Chinni said.

Lata shook her head and walked away.

Lata had more use for books than friends. For her, marriage was yet another milestone; for Chinni and me, it was *The Goal*, *The Ultimate Truth*, *The Purpose of Life*. We spent all our free time discussing our future husbands – plump-yet-pleasing-to-the-eye Chinni kindly overlooking the fact that I had virtually no prospects – and how we would live out our lives.

When Chinni and I weren't together, it was because we had housework to do. One of our daily chores – mine and Malli's – was sweeping and washing the courtyard. Over the years patches of flooring had broken off at awkward angles, making the navigation of our walled-off courtyard an adventure for my friends and me. Amamma had part of it cleaned up, exposing the earth below, before she ran out of money. Because of the uneven flooring, cleaning was a challenge. The walls of our courtyard weren't much better; the straw and mud were plainly visible. Patching them with cow dung was another chore I didn't care for.

Then there was the washing and milking of our cow. I complained about it endlessly, but Amamma was quite unsympathetic; we should be grateful we even had a cow, she said. Amamma's tailoring supplemented the family income we got from selling milk

and cow dung; Malli and I helped out by sewing buttons and hemming edges, but this was a bearable chore.

What I truly detested was the water duty. The well water was good enough for daily use, but we depended on the municipal supply for drinking water. The municipality, in their wisdom, chose to turn on the drinking water only at three in the morning. We arose, I – complaining that Lata wasn't doing her bit, Malli – calmly doing what she had to do. We filled all available utensils and drums with drinking water, because the days the municipal water man overslept, we had no water. Then we put utensils on the stove, one at a time, waited for them to boil over and left them to cool, so water would be ready for drinking in the morning.

Chinni and I swore that when we married, it would only be into rich families where we could expect a municipal water connection that worked during the daylight hours, but more importantly, where the servants took care of such menial chores, leaving us to do important things – like shopping and gossiping.

The one good thing my grandfather did – the only thing, if you asked Amamma – in the short time he was part of my grandmother's life, was to get his name on the rolls of freedom fighters. He hadn't been one himself – too much of a coward, Amamma said. How he got his name there was a mystery, but after he died, the pension from the Government of India was what kept us from lining the road to the temple, tin plate in hand, dependent on the generosity of worshippers.

Once the day's chores were finished, and Amamma's head had hit the pillow for the afternoon, Chinni and I went in search of fun.

A favourite pastime of ours was to sneak past the house of our local oracle, Ranga Nayakamma, daring each other to go inside her house for a 'session.'

Four days a week Ranga Nayakamma was an ordinary woman.

For the other three, she transformed from a meek housewife tending three children and a goat into a whiskey guzzling, chicken-leg chomping, cigarette puffing oracle. She started her day by going into trance, out of which she erupted with frenzied dancing – lips curling, diamond-studded nostrils flaring, kohl-lined eyes flashing, jewelled arms slashing – sort of like Goddess Kali after she had killed a demon, except I didn't think Goddess Kali drank, smoked or ate meat. This trance-and-dance routine continued for a

good three or four hours before the oracle collapsed on the floor, ready to bless people with whatever it was they wanted – in return for gifts of whiskey, chicken (never any other meat – for, on her days off, Ranga Nayakamma was a staunch vegetarian) or *beedis* – the coarse, *tendu*-leaf cigarettes the villagers favoured. Her mostly-male followers were many.

Chinni and I couldn't imagine what would make a housewife give up a respectable life with a husband and children, for this kind of spectacle.

We were expected to spend our free time in the courtyard of my house, or in the village square, where the elders could keep us in check while Amamma took her nap.

A huge banyan occupied the place of pride in the centre of the village square, with a cemented ledge running around it for people to sit on. In the heat of midday, when the chores were done, the men lay down to gossip, making themselves comfortable on creaky wooden cots made of coir. It being unseemly for women to lie down in public, they settled on the ledge, watching the children play, taking a breather from the labours of the day. The boys, for the most part, spent their time swinging from the hanging roots of the banyan tree, or chasing discarded cycle tires with a stick, while young girls played endless rounds of hopscotch. Older girls like us sat demurely on the ledge, pretending to be immersed in embroidering and sewing, but in actuality waiting out the elders. Inevitably, sleep overcame them and eyelids drooped. With the elders no longer awake to keep us in check, Chinni and I felt free to sneak looks at the boys and giggle.

Life was good.

Chapter 4

Now, as we waited by the gate of our compound for Kondal Rao *garu* to arrive and bless Malli's bride-viewing, I tried to ignore Jhampaiah's words. Bad talk, indeed! Such a respectable politician like Kondal Rao *garu*!

The marriage broker hurried up to us, rubber slippers slapping against the dusty road. "Got late. Is Kondal Rao *garu* here?" She looked worried.

I shook my head.

She sagged with relief, and joined the anxious crowd.

A spicy smell wafted in the air. *Pulusu*? My stomach growled. Hopefully no one had heard. Where was Kondal Rao *garu* anyway?

Thirty-five minutes later two jeeps, each loaded with rough-looking men armed with bamboo sticks and scary-looking sickles, screeched to a halt behind Lakshmi *garu*'s tractor. A fat little man, with a droopy moustache, and oily hair knotted at the nape of his short stubby neck, descended from the first jeep. Kondal Rao *garu* scared me now, as he had when Amamma, my sisters and I visited his house two years ago.

He was dressed in the standard politician uniform of dazzling white *kurta* – which strained at his generous belly – and a white cotton *pancha* that barely skimmed the tops of his black patent leather shoes.

Amamma and Murty *garu* hurried up to greet him.

Lakshmi *garu* took a few steps, then stopped. Turning to the villagers gathered by the gate, she said, "Such an important personage Kondal Rao *garu* is. A politician with so much power visiting this house!" She puffed up as if she'd herself conveyed the politician to our house.

They nodded, appropriately awed.

Amamma joined the palms of her hands together in greeting. "I am honoured you have personally come to grace the occasion."

Kondal Rao *garu* shook his head and got back into the jeep, making me wonder why he had bothered to get down in the first place. "Too many things for me to do. Too little time. I am such a busy man, you see."

“Yes, yes, of course,” Amamma stammered, her face a bright red. She slapped her cheeks in remorse. “How could we even *think* that an important personage such as you would have the time to sit through a trifling event such as this?”

He inclined his head.

“Pullamma, Child,” she said to me. “Seek blessings from Kondal Rao *garu*.”

To Kondal Rao *garu*, she said, “With your blessings everything will go well today. My Pullamma’s next in line.”

I touched his feet.

This seemed to mollify Kondal Rao *garu*. “I came merely to reassure you that you couldn’t be marrying your girl into a better family. My man,” he said, pointing an imperious finger at the groom’s father, “has often performed important jobs for me.”

The groom’s father preened.

Amamma and Lakshmi *garu* exchanged a quick glance – had the market price for the groom just gone up?

As the engines rumbled, the groom’s father hurried forward, palms of his hands joined together. Kondal Rao *garu* raised a hand and the drivers of both vehicles killed their engines. He cocked his head, waiting.

“Please,” the groom’s father said. “I humbly beg of you to consider staying on to preside over this occasion.”

Kondal Rao *garu* tapped a stubby finger on his chin. “I drove seven hours to get here. I can’t fritter away my time sitting through the whole bride-viewing, you know.”

“*Aw-wa!*” The other man slapped his mouth. “How could I be so foolish as to expect you to waste your time over such trivial issues?”

“I suppose I could relax at the Party guest house till you finish with your function. Send word if the outcome is positive. I shall arrive and give my blessings.”

“I’m deeply honoured.” The groom’s father bowed.

Tyres screeched. The jeeps were off. The atmosphere lightened, like the aftermath of a violent thunderstorm.

Murty *garu* gestured at Amamma. “The girl’s grandmother. Name is Seetamma *garu*. The mother passed away, such a tragedy. As for the father – well, the less said, the better. Poor lady, the grandmother, to be stuck with such responsibility. I am G. V. K. S.

S. R. Satyanarayana Murty. I live next door, so it is my duty to help with the marriages of the granddaughters, you see.”

Murty *garu*, named for a good number of Gods in the Hindu pantheon, thereby accounting for most of the initials in his name, lived for the respect bride-viewings accorded to elders like him. In his daily life Murty *garu* was showed none – not by his sons, certainly not by his wife.

Tradition decreed that married women perform a myriad of rituals and prayers for the well-being of their husbands. Talk in the village was Lakshmi *garu* did these with barely concealed resentment. Since no respect was forthcoming from her, Murty *garu* spent a lot of time attending bride-viewings as an elder, trying to leverage his stately appearance to gain the respect he so desired.

“Please come.” He led the party past the open shed. Our only cow, freshly scrubbed and decorated with a long slash of vermilion on its forehead, sat chewing cud. It watched our procession incuriously.

“Pullamma,” Ammamma said.

I hurried forward and settled the parents of the groom, the young child and the groom himself on folding chairs borrowed from the priest’s house for just this occasion; our two rickety metal chairs, with their curling edges, simply wouldn’t do.

An assortment of relatives – the women in bright silk saris, the men in pristine white *panchas* and *kurtas* – sat on either side of them, while Lakshmi *garu*’s two sons arranged themselves on the straw mat. Lakshmi *garu* and I hovered by the door.

I wiped damp palms on the sides of my half-sari and took a jerky breath. *If they accept Malli into their family, I will circle the shrine of Goddess Durga one hundred and eight times, I will milk the cow for a whole month without complaining, I –*

“Time for refreshments,” Murty *garu* said, pointing his chin at Lakshmi *garu*. He sat across from the groom’s family in a straight-backed chair, his hand resting on a walking stick, the latter more for effect than anything.

“No, no, please don’t bother,” the groom’s father protested, bouncing the toddler on his knee.

It wouldn’t be proper for a guest to accept an offer of drinks or snacks without being cajoled, so Murty *garu* tried again. “What sir! You have come from so far to see our girl.

What will you think? We don't know how to offer proper hospitality, or what?" Turning to his wife he said, "Tea."

"Coffee," said the father of the groom.

"Coffee," said Murty *garu* to Lakshmi *garu*. He turned to one of his sons. "And some *mirchi bajjis* from the shop. Pronto."

The groom's father frowned. "Why are you getting food from the shop? The bride doesn't know to cook, or what?"

Ammamma shot Murty *garu* a look. "My granddaughter made the *bajjis* with her own hands. She has been properly trained in cooking."

"Of course, of course," Murty *garu* said, dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Can't eat anything made with green chillies," the groom's father said, patting his expansive belly. "Too spicy. Some mixture, perhaps?"

"Mixture?" Murty *garu* said.

Ammamma nodded.

"*Laddu, laddu*," the child shouted from his grandfather's lap.

"*Laddus* for the little one," Murty *garu* said to his son. He leaned forward and put a finger under the child's chin. "Like sweets, do you?"

The child bit the finger.

Murty *garu* snatched it back.

"Cute, isn't he?" said the beaming grandfather.

"Of course, of course." Murty *garu* massaged the finger discreetly, his smile wobbling just a little. "Can I be of further service?"

"Some *kaajas*, perhaps?"

"Ah! *Kaajas*!" Murty *garu*'s face cleared, pain forgotten. He thumped his cane in approval. "Good choice. Our shop-man . . . uh . . . our Malli has magic in her hands when it comes to *kaajas*. Makes them in perfect shapes, she does. Fries them just right – a warm, honey brown." He leaned back in his chair. "And when you sink your teeth into their delicious sweetness . . . mm . . ." He gave a dramatic shudder.

The groom's family exchanged looks.

Lakshmi *garu* cleared her throat, but Murty *garu*'s eyes were closed in bliss. "*Psst!*" she hissed, sounding desperate. Mortification at her husband's behaviour caused her face

to appear even more angular than usual.

Murty *garu* jerked out of his trance and sat up, a beatific smile on his face.

The groom's father squinted at Murty *garu*, a suspicious look on his face, but Murty *garu* showed not a hint of embarrassment.

The two men resumed their chitchat. The child tried to put his finger up his grandfather's nostril. The groom's father waved it away, and accepted the glass of water I offered.

"Pullamma." Murty *garu* raised a bushy white eyebrow at me.

I nodded, heart kicking against my ribs. It was time to bring out the bride.

Chapter 5

Malli was hovering behind the curtained door. I escorted her out. No previous instructions on comportment were necessary for my sister. We had seen enough Telugu movies to know that the bride was supposed to walk demurely, head down. No need to peek at the boy or anyone else – what else were the elders for?

She stood still, a large tray balanced in hand, staring at her big toe, newly painted a shiny red. I stood by her, willing the day to go well for my sister.

A round of introductions ensued. “The bride-to-be is the eldest granddaughter of Seetamma *garu*,” Murty *garu* said.

“And the grandfather?”

“Passed away.”

“So sorry. The father?”

“Has found a nubile maiden in the Himalayas.” Murty *garu* tittered. “She is helping him find God, you see.”

Ammamma’s jaw slackened.

At the glare from his wife, Murty *garu* hastily turned his snicker into a cough. Poor Murty *garu*. Always getting into trouble with someone or the other.

The groom’s father chose not to probe further – about our father, or anything else; he would have made inquiries about the suitability of our family, too.

“The poor lady has two more granddaughters to marry off,” Murty *garu* said.

“Two?” the groom’s father asked, a frown marring the oily smoothness of his forehead. “Who is the number two granddaughter?”

Murty *garu* pointed at me. “That’s Pullamma.”

There I stood in my lime-green-and-yellow half-sari, which was splashed with big purple splotches, which I supposed were flowers. I was miserably aware that this hand-me-down from the fair-skinned Malli – the nicest I owned – was an unfortunate choice of clothing because it clashed violently with the colour of my skin.

The groom’s father leaned forward. Using his hairy caterpillar fingers, he adjusted the angle of his thick-rimmed oversized spectacles. He shook his head as if to say he

couldn't believe Malli and I came from the same stock.

I tugged at my half-sari, conscious it was five inches too short. Would he compliment me, as people often did after realizing I was sister to the fair-skinned Malli and Lata – on the clearness of my skin and the lustre of my long hair, as if in consolation for my coffee coloured skin and abnormal height of 5' 9"? Or would he pity me?

He moved his head to inspect Malli. As he scrunched his nose, the hairs within quivered.

My sister stood queen-like, elegantly draped in a red-and-gold Kanchi-silk sari. Basket-shaped earrings dangled from her ears. A strand of delicate *malli*-flowers, woven through her long braid, adorned her hair. She had taken special care with the henna on her hands and feet. The *bottu* on her forehead, chosen to accentuate the beauty of her large eyes, shimmered red and gold.

She stood with the tray in hand, tea cups clattering just a little.

“So where is number three?”

“Umm. Well.” Murty *garu* put a fist under his chin in contemplation. “Actually she has gone to help out a relative. Such a sad story, you see. Seetamma *garu*'s second daughter's third son broke his leg.” He tapped a slim finger on his lips. “Or was it her third daughter's second son?”

Ammamma cleared her throat.

“Anyway,” Murty *garu* said, “They needed help at home, so the girl was sent over.”

“*Hanh!*” the groom's father said.

The groom's parents exchanged suspicious glances. They knew about the hiding of prettier, younger daughters, of course; they would have done the exact same thing. The question was – did what was being hidden concern them in any way?

The groom's father concluded his prolonged inspection of Malli. “We shall proceed.”

I released my breath.

“Come,” the groom's mother said, patting the stool next to her. Luckily, her headache seemed to have gone away. “Put the tray down.”

Barely in time. Malli's tea-laden tray was beginning to tilt.

Malli was trained in household chores, of course, but balancing fully loaded trays for

long periods of time hadn't been one of them. As she walked across the room, the groom's mother stared intently at Malli's feet. Couldn't blame her; Lakshmi *garu*'s own sister's brother-in-law had been tricked into marrying a girl with diseased legs – with the sari tied low enough to cover her feet, there had been no way to tell she had elephantitis.

Taking Malli's hand in hers, the groom's mother said, "Come, sit here. What is your name?"

"Malli."

Putting a finger under Malli's chin, she said, "What a pretty name. Almost as pretty as you are. My son's name is Ram."

Murty *garu* chuckled. "This is what happens when we name our children after Gods and Goddesses. Because, if this alliance goes through, the Gods Ram and Seeta will no longer be a couple."

Ammamma, who was named for the Goddess Seeta, turned red in the face.

Lakshmi *garu* frowned at Murty *garu*.

"Anyway," Murty *garu* said, "why don't you question the girl?"

"What have you studied?" the groom's mother asked.

"6th class fail," Malli said in a whisper.

"Good, good. Our son almost passed his 7th. Missed by a mere two marks, he did," she said, holding up two fingers. "Two marks, can you believe that?"

Murty *garu* clucked in sympathy.

"T. . . o . . . o educated girls," the groom's father said, sinking his teeth into a luscious *kaaja*, "won't comfort us in our old age." He flicked his tongue to lick the syrup from the corner of his lip. "Worried about themselves, they will be."

"Shouldn't allow these girls to think," Lakshmi *garu* said, jumping in. "Then they won't listen to us." Lakshmi *garu* should know. She had daily battles with her 9th class passed younger daughter-in-law.

"We want a girl who has been trained well," the groom's father said. "We are getting old. She will be needed to take care of us, no tantrums, no nothing."

"My Malli will be the perfect daughter-in-law for you," Ammamma said. "No mind of her own. Just does what she is told."

The groom's mother nodded approvingly.

“We won’t let our daughter-in-law leave the family home for work, or gossip, or any such nonsense,” the groom’s father said. “We have our honour to think of.”

“Our girl is a homebody,” Ammamma said. “You needn’t have any fears on that account. Our Malli will maintain the honour of your family – only time she’ll go out is to the temple. Otherwise always home.”

The groom’s father nodded. He raised an eyebrow at his son. At the groom’s nod, the older man said to the room in general, “We like the girl. She may be taken inside now. We elders need to talk.”

“Pullamma.” Murty *garu* tossed his head at me.

I hurried to take Malli’s arm.

Excerpt from **Tell A Thousand Lies** by *Rasana Atreya*