

THE TEMPLE IS NOT MY FATHER

By

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Part I

“Is the Goddess your husband, Amma?”

Godavari smiled at her young daughter. “No, she’s not.”

“But you’re married to her.”

Godavari nodded. Years ago, when she still believed in goodness and decency and all that foolishness, her father had dressed her in bridal finery and walked her through the streets of their village. She skipped along, feeling important and pretty in her brand new clothes. It wasn’t every day that a girl got married – and to the Goddess herself! The only irritant was Godavari’s own mother. She followed them, wailing and beating her chest, grabbing her husband’s arm every once in a while, falling at his feet, making a complete nuisance of herself.

Why couldn’t her mother understand that this was an honour, something bestowed upon only a chosen few? Why did she have to ruin everything special that Godavari’s father tried to do for her?

Godavari forced a grin on her face, trying to ignore her mother’s embarrassing behaviour. But her mother only wailed harder. Godavari entwined her fingers with her father’s, swinging his hand as high as it would go. She called out to the villagers lining the road to the temple but the men clapped their hands to their mouths and the women hid their faces behind their saris. Meanwhile, Godavari’s mother continued with her wailing.

“Amma?” Sreeja asked, snapping Godavari back from the past. “When did you get

married?”

Godavari leaned back against the trunk of the scrawny guava tree and sighed. “A long time ago.”

In their tiny enclosed courtyard, with its packed-mud floor and ten-foot-high cow dung-coated walls, the narrow metal built-in gate their only access to the world outside, she pondered her life. Though the high walls kept the world out, it also caged the two of them in. But it was important that she remember that no matter how small the house – front room, bathroom, bedroom, kitchen, all interconnected and opening into their miniscule courtyard – it was hers, and hers alone. And, no matter how hard her life, she was so much better off than other women in her situation.

“Is the temple my father?”

Startled, Godavari laughed. “What gave you that idea?”

“You’re married to it.”

“Yes, but the temple isn’t your father.”

Sreeja twirled her braid with a finger. She seemed to be in deep thought. “You’re married to two things. How can that be?”

Godavari lifted Sreeja onto her lap, savouring her little girl smell. “I was dedicated to Goddess Yellamma. Some people call that being married to the Goddess, others call it being married to the temple.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

Was it? A long time ago, being married to the Goddess was indeed an honour. This was back when classical dance and music were an integral part of temple worship. Then, women like her enjoyed a high status in society.

“Amma?” Sreeja prodded.

“Yes, it’s a good thing.”

“Then why do the villagers make faces when they say it?” A tear, perfectly formed, teetered at the edge of one of Sreeja’s beautiful brown eyes.

“Oh child!” Godavari pulled Sreeja closer, her heart overflowing with love for this child of hers. Soon – too soon – she’d be old enough to know what those taunts meant.

Sreeja buried her face in her mother’s shoulder. “Everyone else has a father at home. How come we don’t?”

Godavari ran a loving hand over her daughter's hair. "You have a grandfather who loves you."

"But he's not my father."

She should have seen this coming. She should have been prepared with an answer.

"I do have one." The child looked up at her mother. "Don't I?"

The cautious, hopeful tone of her daughter broke Godavari's heart anew. She was married to the temple, but it wasn't the temple that had put the baby in her belly.

"What's his name?"

"I don't know," Godavari said softly.

Sreeja whimpered in distress.

Godavari hated the lies, but what choice did she have?

She wrapped the free edge of her sari around them both and buried her face in Sreeja's hair, wishing that there was some way she could protect her child from the pain and stigma that were headed her way as surely as the village chief's filthy eyes defiled Godavari each time she had the misfortune to cross paths with him.

Sreeja raised her head. Using the back of her hand to wipe away the tear, she looked into her mother's eyes. "How come you have no wedding photos?"

Because her wedding was no wedding.

"Your grandfather forgot the camera," Godavari said.

More lies. But why should her young daughter have to experience disillusionment at such a tender age?

Knock! Knock!

Pleasure replaced the pain in Sreeja's eyes. "Tataiyya?"

Godavari nodded. Other than her father, no one ever knocked on her door. Not in broad daylight, that is.

Sreeja jumped down from her mother's lap. Godavari watched as she pranced her way to the door. Soon her child's playfulness would vanish; her innocence would follow.

"Tataiyya!" Sreeja jumped on her grandfather, almost knocking him to the ground.

"You and I both," Godavari's father said, laughing, "are getting too old for this."

"You're not old." She wrapped her legs around his waist and leaned back, squinting. "Are you?"

Godavari's father laughed again. "I am a grandfather, therefore I'm old."

"Sreeja, child, let Tataiyya breathe," her mother said.

Sreeja unwrapped her legs and slid down. "What did you get me?" She thrust her hands in the pockets of his long, flowing kurta and came away empty. "No gift?" Tears hovered. "But it'll be my birthday in three days! I'll be eight years old! You said you'd get me something special from the city. You promised!"

"Silly girl," Tataiyya said, tweaking her nose. "Close your eyes." He wagged a finger. "No peeking."

Sreeja closed her eyes tightly. "Hurry up, Tataiyya."

Godavari smiled as her daughter danced on one foot, then the other, unable to bear the suspense.

Sreeja splayed her hands against her face and slowly opened an eye – and looked into the grinning face of her grandfather. "What is it? What is it?"

"Where's my kiss?" he demanded, waving a package just out of reach.

Sreeja planted a smack on his cheek and grabbed the package. Falling on the straw mat under the tree, she tore the packet open. A shiny fabric of the smoothest silk fell out. "New clothes!"

"Wear it and show me."

Sreeja shook the dress open. A full-length skirt, a midriff-length sari blouse, a long piece of silk. Throwing the skirt and blouse aside, she draped the silk around herself in an approximation of a sari. She rooted around for the matching bangles and slid them on. A bright *bottu* on her forehead, new hairclips on the sides of her braids and she was ready.

"Amma!" She twirled around, a wide smile on her chubby little face. "Don't I look pretty?"

"You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen." Godavari smiled at her daughter's exuberance.

"Here's something else for you!" He gave Godavari a quick look before digging into his cloth shoulder bag.

Godavari watched as her father's hand emerged from the bag, one inch at a time. Her eyes spotted something familiar. Her belly tightened. He wouldn't dare!

He held a distinctive piece of jewellery, white and delicate.

Voice harsh, she said, "What's the meaning of this?"

"What do you mean?" he stammered. "It's a pretty dress for my pretty little granddaughter."

"Not the dress. That." She threw her head in the direction of the white shell necklace.

"Amma!" Sreeja tugged at her mother's hand, looking small and scared.

Godavari gave her a reassuring pat before turning back to her father.

He wouldn't look her in the eye. "I thought, perhaps, that it was time..."

She tore the jewellery from his grasp and hurled it against the dung-coated wall of her courtyard, where it broke apart with a satisfying thwack. When she turned to her father, her voice was hard. "Get out of my house!"

"But –"

"Out!"

He stalked out, slamming the gate behind him.

"Amma!" Sreeja tugged at Godavari's hand.

Godavari knelt and drew the trembling girl into her arms. "What, child?"

"Now we don't have a grandfather, either?"

Godavari wrapped her arms around her daughter and carried her to the cot by the guava tree. She ran a hand over her daughter's back in gentle circles, trying to find a way to tell her – tell her what? That her grandfather was a slimy, slithering snake of the worst kind?

Sreeja looked up at her mother, her beautiful eyes looking wounded. "Tataiyya never hurt us. He made us laugh. Why did you send him away?"

Because the distinctive white-shell jewellery he'd brought for his loving, trusting, innocent granddaughter was the mark of the *devdasi* – the bastard wanted to dedicate her to the Goddess!

Godavari shook her head, trying to clear it of the outrage. "Because he did something bad."

"What did he do?"

She kissed her child's forehead. "Someday you'll understand," she said.

"And I hope that day is far, far away," she prayed.

Fifteen minutes after her father slammed the gate, there was another knock. Godavari jumped to her feet. She strode to the door and yanked it open. “You bloody man! You –”

“Oops! Looks like we came at a bad time?”

Godavari looked at the girls standing in front of her, probably fourteen and fifteen, the younger one in t-shirt and shorts! Other than in movies, what girl ever wore such indecent clothes? “What do you want?” she barked.

Sreeja sidled up to Godavari, her small hand creeping into her mother’s.

“We’re bored. Can we come in?”

“Why do you talk funny?” Sreeja piped in.

The girl laughed. “Because we’re from America and we talk mostly in English, our Telugu has become funny. My name is Vanaja and this is my sister.” She pointed with her head. “Neeraja.”

“Why are you wearing boys’ clothes?”

“Because, in America, it is okay for girls to wear boys’ clothes.”

“Do boys wear girls’ clothes, then? Half-saris?”

Vanaja laughed again. “No, boys have to wear boys’ clothes, but girls can wear both. Back home we do wear half-saris to the temple.”

“America isn’t our home,” her sister said softly. “Not anymore.”

Vanaja’s face lost its animation.

Neeraja looked down at Sreeja, a gentle smile on her face. “Don’t you watch TV? Haven’t you seen girls in shorts before?”

“What she sees on TV is a fairy tale to her. Nothing to do with real life,” Godavari said brusquely. “You should leave. This isn’t a place for decent people.”

“You look fine enough to me.”

“You’re supposed to stay away. Did no one tell you?”

“Of course, they did!” Vanaja raised her chin in defiance. “Why do you think we came?”

“Do your parents know you’re here?”

Vanaja pointed a hand – her nails alternately painted purple and black – at the double-storied building a few houses away. “That’s our grandmother’s house. Our parents dumped us there. Can we come in?”

Godavari gave the girls a long look. "You'll get in serious trouble."

Vanaja rolled her eyes. "Like we care."

Godavari sighed. "You'd better come in before someone sees you on my doorstep and your reputations are ruined." She closed the door after the girls stepped in.

"Why aren't we supposed to come to your house?" Vanaja asked.

"Because we're low-caste people."

"How low?"

"Lower than low," Godavari snapped.

But that girl, Vanaja, it didn't seem much could stop her. She strolled over to the cot and fell on it. "Untouchables? Calling someone that is a crime, you know. So says the Government of India."

Godavari winced, both from the words and the sound of distress her ancient cot made. Did the girl have no sense of propriety, lolling around on a bed like that? In public? In the middle of the day?

"Is it because you're married to the temple that we're supposed to avoid your house?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"Sorry," Neeraja mumbled, her face turning red. "My sister's tongue does tend to run away."

Sreeja inclined her head, trying to peer into Vanaja's mouth.

Vanaja laughed. "My tongue stayed home today."

Sreeja hid her face in her mother's sari.

"Were you born into a low caste," Vanaja said, "or did they turn you into one?"

Godavari gave a short laugh, almost amused by this persistent child. "My grandfather and your grandmother are brother and sister."

Vanaja sat up. "No way!"

Godavari frowned at the funny mix of English and Telugu, then decided that even the mangled Telugu the girl spoke was enough to convey what she meant.

"That means you're not as low caste as you like to pretend," Vanaja said.

Neeraja frowned at her sister.

"Do you always say the first thing that pops in your head?" Godavari asked.

“Pretty much!” Vanaja said cheerfully. “So, what’s the deal?”

“When my father married me off to the temple, your grandmother cut all ties with our family.”

“Whoa! So Grandma never spoke to her brother again?”

Godavari shook her head. “My father’s actions shamed the entire family and automatically lowered me in the eyes of society. I don’t blame them. Cutting us off was their only option. How else could they retain respect?”

“Why was that the only option?” Neeraja looked like she was the older sister and the more sensible of the two.

Godavari gave her daughter a quick glance. “I’ll tell you someday.” If that day ever came. The moment the grandmother found out that these girls had set foot in Godavari’s house, they’d get hauled back to wherever it was they’d come from. She turned toward the house. “I have work to do.”

Neeraja got the hint. “We should go.”

“Why?” Vanaja stretched out on the cot. “It’s not like anyone’s dying for our company.”

Neeraja widened her eyes at her sister, trying to signal her intent to leave, but the younger girl ignored her.

It was on the tip of Godavari’s tongue to order the girls back home, but Vanaja beat her to it. “I know you’re going to tell us to leave, but please don’t! We’re bored. It’s vacation. There’s nothing to do. Why don’t you do your work and we’ll help your daughter practice school work for next year. It’ll be good for me, too. Otherwise my brain cells will wither away in this god-awful heat.”

“She doesn’t go to school.”

“What!”

“She is not enrolled in school.”

“Why on earth not? Don’t you want her to get an education? Do well in life?”

“Of course I do!” Godavari snapped. “Do you think I choose to condemn my daughter to an existence like mine?”

“One of those ‘married to temple’ things, huh? Oh well. You do whatever you have to do and we’ll teach your daughter – what’s her name?”

“Sreeja.”

“Hey, this is meant to be!”

“What do you mean?” Godavari was puzzled.

“Vana-ja, Neera-ja, Sree-ja. Get it? The ‘three-jas.’ We’ll teach Sreeja English and math. How about that?”

Godavari thought it over. Why not? It would do her daughter good to spend some time with other children, stuck inside the courtyard as she was. It wasn’t easy on a child when people saw her coming and hurried over to the other side of the road. Besides, these girls wouldn’t be back. That much she knew. She nodded her acceptance.

As Godavari walked into the house, she could hear Vanaja say, “All right! Let’s get some basics down. What’s your mother’s name?”

And her daughter said, “My mother’s name is Godavari, like the beautiful river. And the temple is not my father.”

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Later that night, as Sreeja got ready for bed, she said, “It was fun today, with Neeraja *akka* and Vanaja *akka*.”

Godavari smiled. Sreeja had bonded enough with the girls that she was adding ‘older sister’ to both their names.

“We don’t have a father. We don’t have a grandfather, either. Why don’t we go away to some place where people are nice? We could make friends, find a new father for our family.”

If only. Godavari felt a pang of ache. She tucked her daughter in, trying to hide her distress.

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Knock! Knock!

Godavari and Sreeja looked at each other. A knock at 9:30 in the morning? Godavari went up to the gate and cautiously unlatched it. Before she could open it fully Vanaja fell in, pulling her sister behind her.

“Don’t want to get into trouble,” she said, grinning. “Can’t let anyone see us.” She bounded over to the cot under the guava tree and fell on it with her usual lack of decorum.

Godavari closed the gate and leaned against it. “Didn’t I tell you coming over could get you in serious trouble?”

As usual Neeraja watched, letting her younger sister do the answering, which she did with a snort. “Yeah, yeah. What are they going to do? Kick us to some remote corner of the earth? Been there, done that. Besides, Sreeja is our second cousin. No one said we couldn’t go over to the houses of relatives.”

Godavari picked up a couple of backless straw chairs from a corner of the yard and placed one close to Neeraja. She sat down on the other. “You don’t believe in holding back, do you?”

Vanaja grinned and settled herself more comfortably.

“You’d better tell me what you’re doing here in the village, so far from home.”

Vanaja stretched out on the cot, head resting on the wooden edge of the frame. “Home? Where is home?” Her voice was bitter.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?” Neeraja said.

“All right.” Vanaja took a deep breath. “It all started when my father’s friend’s daughter was caught kissing someone.” She pointed her chin at Sreeja and asked Godavari, “Too much for tender ears?”

“How bad does it get?”

“Not very.”

“Tell us, then.”

“All right. When my parents heard what happened, they lost it.”

At Godavari’s puzzled look, Vanaja twirled a finger near her head. “They went crazy,” she said in her awkward mix of English and Telugu. “Mad?”

Godavari nodded. She did know some English, but Vanaja’s accent made it difficult to follow.

“So our parents decided that the best solution for us would be to grow up in India with our grandmother. No telling what we’d do in America, you know? Lose our virginity to the next boy who came along, get pregnant – that sort of stuff.”

Godavari winced. “Why should something your friend did concern them?”

“We could have caught the bad behaviour from our friend – you know, like a virus or something.” Vanaja rolled her eyes. “A couple of years ago another friend of ours was

sent to live in India because her parents didn't want her morals corrupted. Since that time, those parents are the ideal parents as far as my father is concerned. It's not as if we ever gave our parents reason for complaint. They lectured us often enough on proper behaviour. This incident gave them just the excuse to pack us out of their lives." She blinked away tears. "In preparation for our banishment, they threw away our indecent clothes – you know, the sleeveless t-shirts, the knee-baring skirts. Luckily I was able to hide this pair of shorts. The rest of our clothes were stuffed in two suitcases. Next thing we knew, we were on our way to India, escorted by a colleague of my father's, who, happily enough, was traveling to India on business. He dumped us in Hyderabad, and here we are."

There was silence. The expression on Neeraja's face was sad, while Vanaja's expression was bitter.

Godavari didn't know how to comfort these girls. Confined as she was to her house, she had no experience in dealing with people.

"Our parents couldn't even be bothered to bring us to India personally. Said they couldn't take the time off from work. They assured us they were sending us away for our own good. They said they wanted us to be immersed in the culture. I pointed out that we went to the temple each week and that we were respectful of elders and traditions, so what more did they expect from us? My father said this constant questioning was precisely what indicated a complete lack of respect for elders and was the reason he wanted us raised in India. He slapped me as he said this. Can you believe it?" She raised a hand and looked intently at her painted nails, trying to hold back the tears. "And you know what's worse? Jayant, my own twin, he gets to stay with them. Poor Jayant, he fought so hard to have us stay. He assured them he'd never seen us behave inappropriately. In desperation, he even told them about the time *he'd* kissed Suzie from next door. And you know what? They didn't care!" She sat up, her lips tight with anger. "Can you believe that?"

Godavari put a hand on Vanaja's arm in sympathy.

Vanaja gave her a flicker of a smile. "So if we wish to spend our summer vacation in your house, it is nobody's damn business but ours."

Godavari found herself sympathizing with the girls. She knew first-hand what it

meant to be so badly let down by a parent that trusting others didn't come easy. But she had to make the girls understand how disastrous – even dangerous – it could be for them to be seen associating with her. “If someone finds out that you girls have been visiting me, there will be a scandal the likes of which you couldn't begin to imagine. Your reputations will be ruined.”

“We'll take our chances,” Vanaja said, and that was that.

Was she even getting through to the girls, with their Telugu and her English? Godavari wondered how much Telugu the girls understood. Probably about as much English as Sreeja did, from watching all those American cartoons on TV.

“Our grandmother begins her prayers at 9:30 each morning and goes on till 11:30. If we sneak back before she's done, we should be good.”

“What about when you're coming over? What if someone sees you then?”

“We've been using the narrow lane behind our grandmother's house. We'll make sure to look around carefully before darting into your house.” Vanaja leaned forward. “Think about how good it'll be for little Sreeja. She'll get to know her American cousins. In the two hours we're here, we'll play with her, we'll teach her stuff – and we'll keep her out of your hair.”

Sreeja giggled at the unfamiliar expression.

Vanaja smiled. “Good for you, good for her, good for us, don't you think?”

Hope lit Sreeja's big eyes.

Godavari looked at her daughter for a long moment, then nodded. She would just have to prepare for the worst, because nothing good could come of it. That much she knew.

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On the veranda Godavari sat on a straw mat, slicing a raw banana on the vertical blade of the floor knife, the wooden base of the knife firmly wedged underfoot. In the days since the girls had been coming over, they'd settled into something of a routine. Vanaja played with Sreeja for an hour or so, while Neeraja asked to help with the cooking, watching carefully as Godavari added various ingredients to the pan.

When Vanaja had tired herself and Sreeja out, she'd flop on the cot in the courtyard and Neeraja would take over. Occasionally Vanaja would call out to Godavari, wanting

to talk.

Today Vanaja asked, “You got a minute?”

The girl had a strange way with words. Godavari waved her over, checking to make sure that her daughter wasn't within hearing distance. Fortunately Neeraja and Sreeja sat a little distance away, giggling over a book. Godavari indicated the straw mat with her eyes, and Vanaja's legs folded on it like unwieldy limbs on a newborn calf. Mere weeks ago Godavari would have shaken her head at the girl's clumsiness. Now she was beginning to see past the ineptitude, to the caring girl within. Because of this girl and her older sister, her daughter had blossomed. These weeks had been an incredible discovery of friendship and bonding for her child. She had learned what it was like to have friends, what it felt like to giggle over nothing, what it meant to look forward to their visits for no reason other than the pleasure of their company. Of the two sisters, Vanaja was the more boisterous – she chased little Sreeja all over the courtyard, taught her silly songs in English, played endless rounds of hopscotch. Neeraja was the decorous one, motherly almost. She listened to Sreeja's stories, taught her numbers and English, read her books. Sreeja, in turn, was helping the sisters improve their Telugu.

Godavari worried about what would happen when the grandmother found out that the girls had been visiting her – and find out she would. In a village of this size, it was only a matter of time. Though she often reminded them about the consequences of associating with her, lately the warnings were half-hearted. She had grown used to their coming over. She did fear that Sreeja was getting too attached to them, but she could not bear to deprive her child of the only friends she'd ever had. They were the only friends Godavari had ever had, too.

“Why are you the village scandal?” Vanaja asked.

Godavari smiled in amused affection. One couldn't accuse this girl of holding back. She set the knife aside and rested her chin on an upraised knee. She'd been expecting the question, wondering how long it would take for this one to work up the courage to ask it. For all the trouble that was bound to follow, she owed these two an explanation. Releasing a heavy sigh, she said, “Do you know what a prostitute is?”

Vanaja looked at Godavari in shock. “You mean . . . you mean?”

It took a lot to ruffle this one. Godavari nodded. “That's what I'm known as in the

village, yes.”

“But . . . I mean . . . Sreeja said no one ever comes over other than us.” The girl blushed.

Deciding to put Vanaja out of her misery, Godavari said, “Each night a man used to come over. It was . . . horrible. Then something happened that changed my life for the better.” She swallowed. “My mother committed suicide.”

Vanaja looked shocked. “How could your mother’s killing herself be a good thing?”

“It was the best thing that could have happened to my daughter, to me, even to my poor mother – given how miserable all of our lives were. Because of her great sacrifice, I was able to protect my daughter from the sordidness of my own life. Before she died, my mother left me this house and all of her money. She went behind my father’s back and hired a lawyer, making sure my father couldn’t touch a paisa of the money she’d inherited from her own mother. Then she hanged herself from a ceiling fan.”

Vanaja was speechless.

“Because I had the money now – not a lot, but enough to live a life of dignity – I was able to put a stop to the . . . all that. My mother made the ultimate sacrifice for me. I miss her terribly . . .” Godavari’s voice caught. Clearing her throat, she continued, “But if that’s the only way the Goddess would protect my child . . .”

“In America prostitutes usually have pimps, men who make arrangements with clients.” Now that the shock had worn off, Vanaja’s eyes sparkled at the prospect of scandalous gossip. “Did you have one, too?”

Godavari had to laugh at the relish in the girl’s voice. “Yes, I did.”

“Who was he?”

Godavari sobered. “My father.”

“Your own father?” When Godavari nodded, the girl said, “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! Your father makes my own look like a saint.”

“I don’t doubt it. He set me up in a small hut with two other girls as pathetic as me. My mother braved social scorn and my bad attitude, and visited me every evening, rain or shine. She brought me food, clothes, and more importantly, unconditional love. And, as long as she lived, she stood guard at my doorstep. There were times when my father hit her or tried to drag her away by the hair, but she fought back, never letting anyone in.”

Godavari sighed. "I was too naïve to see her love. All I saw was the embarrassment she caused my father by creating a scene."

"What about that first client? How did he get past your mother?"

"My mother came each evening and sat through the night, so she got a friend of hers, a woman, to stand guard during the day. My father was able to pay the friend off for the first client. Fortunately, the friend had some decency left, so she didn't allow any others in."

"Wow!" Vanaja was quiet for a bit. "But one client hardly makes you a prostitute."

"You're but a child. You don't understand the ways of the world. If you . . . , you know, with anyone not your husband, you deserve everything society dishes out to you, and more."

"But it wasn't your fault!"

"In the eyes of God it is."

"Huh!" Vanaja shook her head in disbelief. "All that leftover British Victorian morality? In the land of the Kama Sutra?"

Godavari had no idea what the girl meant, but she shrugged.

"Why did you allow the client to continue abusing you?"

"My father told me it was what the Goddess wanted. I was eleven years old and madly adored my father. What did I know?"

"Eleven!"

"Hmm. Fool that I was, I continued to worship him. And, because he treated my mother with contempt, so did I. It broke her heart when she found out I was pregnant. She created a major scandal by leaving my father and moving in with me. She even left behind my brother – the much wanted son – because she didn't want my stigma touching him. She helped me with the baby for the first three years. But, at some point, she must have decided I needed more than what she could give me. That's when she got the lawyer." Her voice turned sad. "It was only after my mother died – five years ago, it was – that I began to see my father for who he really was. Now, when I think of my poor mother and how badly I treated her . . ."

She leaned forward and wiped the lone tear that ran down Vanaja's cheek. "Don't waste your tears on me. I'm so much better off than a lot of others. I have a place of my

own, I don't depend on anyone for money. And I have a daughter I would give my life for."

"But you have no dignity." Vanaja's voice was small.

"So I cannot walk in the village with my head held high. But my body is my own. And – more importantly – I have the money to ensure that my daughter never suffers the same fate as me."

"For that you need to send Sreeja to school!"

"Don't I know?" Godavari sighed. "The village elders – the same ones who keep trying to belly-crawl through my door in the dead of the night – decided my daughter would be a bad influence on their children. They won't allow her to attend the village school. Besides, what would I write on the line for 'father of the child'?"

"The man won't allow you to write his name on the birth certificate?"

"He said he would kill my daughter if I even thought about it."

"Can't you move away?"

"How?" Godavari said, idly playing with a vegetable peel. "I tried selling my house. Without the sale, I wouldn't have enough money to survive elsewhere. I used to dream of putting my baby in a good school and living out my life as a widow in some big, anonymous town. That kind of respect is unimaginable for someone like me. But who would buy a house from a fallen woman?"

"Aren't there helpful people around, people who do good?"

"There are a lot of dedicated people who work for various NGOs."

"NGO?"

"Non-Governmental Organization. They're made up of good-hearted people who spend a lifetime helping women like me. But they've largely ignored me because there are so many women who are worse off, believe me. I no longer have the indignity of a man abusing my body, I never had multiple abusers. I have a roof over my head, and I can put food in my child's mouth."

"Would it be terrible to ask you more about this 'married to temple' business?"

Godavari gave a short laugh. "Women like me are called *devdasis* – servants of God. Or Goddess. Except that it isn't God we are serving. There is a Goddess, Yellamma. You're not likely to find her idol in the home of decent folks. She is the patron Goddess

of the fallen. What happens is that, for one reason or another, parents come under extreme pressure – a sick child, great financial worry, the desperate desire for a male child. They feel they're being punished because the Goddess is displeased, and the only way out is by great sacrifice.”

“And you were that sacrifice?” Vanaja looked horrified.

Godavari nodded. “My parents had five children – all daughters. My mother was happy not to have more children, but my father was desperate for a son. I was the middle daughter, the third child. My father couldn't offer the older two to the Goddess because they had reached puberty. I was the next in line so, by default, I was the one to be sacrificed.”

“And your mother?”

“She begged him not to do it. She cried, she pleaded with him, tried to get various relatives to make him see reason. She even promised to keep having children until they had a son. But once my father makes up his mind, nothing can change it. So he talked to the priest in Yellamma's temple and arranged for me to be dedicated to her.”

“The NGO did nothing?”

“They did try to intervene, but they didn't know my father.”

“Couldn't they have called the police?”

“You must remember, the police are also part of society. What the society believes, they believe. The government can ban all kinds of things but, if the policeman's faith is offended, he's not going to follow the law.”

“So where did prostitution come in?”

“You know that India was ruled by the British?”

“Yeah.”

“In the kingdoms of the Indian subcontinent, the kings were the patrons of temples and the arts. This included the *devdasis*. When the British annexed their kingdoms, the kings were stripped of power because now all their income went directly to the British. They were so busy trying to survive, they didn't have the time to worry about *devdasis*. If that wasn't bad enough, the British tried to outlaw the *devdasi* practice on the grounds that it supported prostitution. Because they couldn't tell the difference between the respectable *devdasi* and the common dance girl, who was indeed a prostitute, they ruined

the lives of many.”

“How come?”

“Well, girls were still dedicated to the Goddess. Because she was married to the Goddess, mere mortals couldn’t marry the girl – though, obviously, kings and the wealthy had higher opinions of themselves. But the kings no longer had the money. And, because of the prostitution stigma, the wealthy distanced themselves. Having no way to support themselves, these girls were forced into prostitution, the very thing the British were trying to prevent.”

“But the *devdasi* system started in a good way, didn’t it, when dedication meant to be in service of the Goddess?”

“It did. But men are capable of unimaginable cruelty. Perhaps, when the *devdasis* started to be equated with prostitutes, the intentions of those dedicating the girls also changed. Instead of thinking of the Goddess, they began to think of what was in it for them.”

“So all *devdasis* are prostitutes?”

“Not at all. If the girl is fortunate enough to find work that affords her a life of dignity, she is able to escape the abuse. Officially, the dedication of girls to the Goddess is banned, but so many things happen behind the government’s back. Since the girl is dedicated before puberty, she is taken out of school. With no education, what chance does she have of trying to find honourable work? She can marry if she can find a man brave enough to take on the Goddess – and I’m not saying it hasn’t happened, but it is rare. The government tries to help by giving the *devdasis* land, building schools for their children, providing them with jobs.”

“Then how come you won’t take their help for Sreeja?”

“I’d rather jump into a well. Can you imagine the life I’d be subjecting her to? Limiting her to the *devdasi*-only community, forever ostracized, never a chance at respectability?”

“Forgive me for saying this, but . . .”

“I don’t interact with respectable people anyway. Yes, I know. But, as long as I’m part of the village, I can still hope for some amount of respectability. Isolate me in the *devdasi* community, and I might as well give up on a normal life for my daughter.”

Excerpt from **The Temple Is Not My Father** by *Rasana Atreya*