

ONE

The apartment was a beehive of activity. Ashok and I had been cleaning, cleansing, throwing and hiding stuff all morning. My mother-in-law was arriving tomorrow from India to stay with us for about three months. Ashok had been in a bad mood ever since he heard the news, and was increasingly edgy and angry as her arrival neared. He had taken a day off from work today and had been cleaning his bedroom. Huge boxes of books, magazines, CDs and t-shirts made way for books, *saris* and *kurtis*, along with my cookery books.

“Where do we hide this stuff?” I asked.

It was a cardboard box full of his things.

“On my head. GIVE,” shouted Ashok.

Great. You can shout all you want, I didn't ask your mother to drop in, by the way.

I gave him the cardboard box and went to the kitchen where I had cleared some space for the photos of God and Goddesses that my mother-in-law had sent with some of her relatives, two months ago.

“LISTEN. We need to put our wedding photo somewhere,” he said.

Oh, yes. We need to show your mother what a lovely couple we are, don't we?

“Okay.”

“Pick out a photo from the marriage album and put it in this frame. I'll hang it up somewhere.”

“Okay.”

Given the chaotic condition of the apartment, it took almost an hour to search for the album. Leafing through the photos, a wave of nostalgia washed over me as I looked at my mother and sister's photographs. My Mom, looking so happy, proud and relieved that her daughter had married into a 'good' family. My heart felt heavy when I looked at her photo. *Will she ever know what I am going through here? Will I ever get out of this mess?*

“Are you done?” asked Ashok.

I skimmed through the album and in the end took out the reception photo. I was wearing a wine-colored silk sari and he a black blazer. He had a stern look on his face, while I was radiant, smiling away happily.

I took out the photo and gave it to him. He pocketed it and left the room. I went back to what was to be 'our' room and sat down in front of his old laptop, that was mine now. The internet was my only refuge. While Ashok was in the office, I spent hours browsing through the internet, checking out recipes and trying them out in my small kitchen. Though Ashok was largely unappreciative of my efforts, Sunil would praise my cooking. Yet I never took anything that he said at face value. I knew that Sunil felt guilty about my predicament and tried to be nice to me.

Ashok peeped inside the room and said, "I'm going out now. I'll be back late, will be eating out, so don't wait up."

"Okay."

I went to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. I checked out my favorite website and wrote down the ingredients for *paneer pakoras*. I was sure my mother-in-law would not allow me to make *paneer* during her stay here. Ashok had been behaving as if he had been dealt poor hand, but it was I who would suffer for the next three months. Ashok could escape to his office for a good part of the day and night, but I would have to be here at home listening to her, answering her questions and lying.

I went back to the album, leafing mindlessly through the photos of every ritual that bound me to Ashok, from the second engagement to the last ceremony of putting the *metti* on my toes. It has been just three years since our marriage yet I felt as if it was longer than that. After thumbing through the entire album, I settled down to a fitful sleep.



TWO

I was jarred awake when my mobile phone rang. Disoriented, I checked the time. It was around twelve a.m. It was Divya, my sister calling from India.

“Nithya. Hi, How are you? What time is it now? Did I wake you up?”

She always asked the same question. I shook myself awake and sat up.

“Divya. It’s okay. I’m awake anyway. Ashok is not back home yet. How are you and how is Amma?”

“Amma is fine. She is asking if you have any ‘good news?’”

I closed my eyes for a second. ‘Good news’ actually meant, ‘Are you pregnant yet?’. ‘Do you think you will get pregnant this month?’ or ‘By any chance, do you think you will not get your period?’ I was tired of answering these questions. I wondered if I would ever get away from this question. With a sigh, I opened my eyes and tried to act normal. “*Ayyo*. You’re calling me in the middle of the night for this? Tell Amma that we are not planning any sort of ‘good news’ as of now,” I replied.

“Sorry. It is just that your mother-in-law keeps calling Chittappa all the time and keeps telling him that you’re not pregnant yet.”

I already knew that. My aunt and my mother-in-law had a conference call last week to share their angst at my inability to produce an offspring. My mother-in-law acted as though her investment in me as a brood mare was a total waste, and my aunt was full of suggestions about how to get pregnant. She even started suggesting ‘positions’ best suited to get pregnant. It was a good joke and I might have laughed but for the fact that the joke was on me.

“Listen. I have some good news then. I passed the interview in Wipro. I will be joining next month once I get the offer letter.”

It took some time for me to realize the importance of what she just said. *She got a job*. This was the best news that I had heard since I got married. I could feel myself getting teary-eyed with happiness. At least Divya was able to accomplish what I couldn’t.

“Divya, this is great news. Wonderful. What will your salary be?”

“Starting will be twenty-five thousand rupees. I may be in the US project team. Won’t that be great? Then I can come to California and stay with you.”

God forbid. NO. You are too innocent to see us in all our married glory.

“Yeah sure. Let’s see. Did you get the money that I sent?”

“Nithya, stop sending money. Now that I have got a job I don’t want to inconvenience Athimber,” she said.

They never believed me when I told them that it was my own money that I was sending.

“Okay. But if you need money for anything just give me a call,” I replied.

“I don’t think we need money now. Our days of struggle are over Nithya. We don’t have to depend on Chithi or Chittappa for anything now. In another six months, I’m going to look for a house and get out of here,” she said enthusiastically.

We lived in a dilapidated one-room apartment on the by-streets of Mylapore Kutchery road that our Chittappa gave us for free.

“I hope it happens. You have no idea how happy I am,” I said fervently.

“I know. Anyway take care. Go back to sleep,” she said happily.

“Bye, take care.”

My mother was the eldest in the family and she had a younger stepsister. Her stepmother married her off at a young age to an alcoholic whose only achievement in life was siring my sister and I. Her stepsister married a smart army major who retired as a colonel. My father died in an accident when I was in the tenth standard. He never held down a permanent job and in the end we found out that he had been borrowing money from others, and was bringing it at home as salary. With debts amounting to one *lakh* rupees, rent, household expenses and school fees, my mother was completely overwhelmed.

My uncle, ‘Chittappa’, had by then retired from the army and had built himself a swanky bungalow in Mylapore. With nowhere else to go, my mother went to her stepsister for help. Chittappa gave us his old house near Madhava Perumal Kovil to stay in. My mother became her sister’s glorified servant and helped with cooking, laundry, and housekeeping.

So, this was indeed good news. If Divya could get my mother out of Chittappa's house both physically and mentally, it would be great for everybody. She had spent half of her life slaving for them and now it was high time that we looked after her. My situation was hopeless in any case but I had striven hard to hide it from all, especially my mother.

Just as I was turning off the light to settle back to sleep, the phone rang again. It was my father-in-law. I was on my guard again, twisting the phone cord nervously.

"*Amma* Nithya. How are you? How is Ashok? I just left your mother-in-law at the airport. She has boarded the plane," he said.

That's just great.

"Okay."

"Is Ashok there?" he asked hesitatingly.

"No." I didn't want to talk to him any more than necessary. In fact, in three years, I had avoided speaking to him wherever possible. Once I was naïve enough to think that he was unaware of our situation. But recently I realized he knew everything; and despite that he had arranged our marriage.

He was silent for a while then asked, "Nithya, is everything set for your mother-in-law's visit in the US? Where is Ashok? Will he be picking her up at the airport?"

"He has gone out with Sunil," I said.

"Oh. Will he pick her up or not?" he asked hurriedly.

"He told me that he would..." I said and hesitated.

"I hope he goes alone to the airport. I just want her to be comfortable there. I hope you understand," he said in a worried voice.

"Really? I thought you wanted to know something else. You know everything right?" I asked him.

He immediately got defensive, "I don't know what you are talking about. Don't try to act smart with me. You were almost a servant in Narasimhachari's house. Your mother didn't even have one gram of gold to give you. You were living on your uncle and aunt's mercy. Your father didn't even leave money to educate you or your sister. You have lived on other people's charity all your life. I got you married to my son, gave you jewelry, paid for your ticket to the USA. Would any father-in-law do this? And you know what, I bore the entire marriage expenses too and you have the audacity to ask me questions? Just who do you think you are?"

I tried to interrupt, but something was wrong with my voice, as usual.

He continued. “Just keep one thing in mind. While Saroja is in the States I want you to make sure that everything is normal. She is a heart patient so please don’t argue with her or tell her anything. We will speak more about this when you come down here. Until then I don’t want any more discussion about this. Do you understand?”

He didn’t expect a reply and put the phone down. I put the phone down slowly. My heart was burning with anger and the familiar bile of resentment was coming up my throat. I felt as if I could break something. I clenched my hand and sat down on the bed again and asked myself, ‘Will I ever be free?’



THREE

Ashok didn't come back home in the night nor did I expect him to. He would probably go pick up my mother-in-law straight from wherever he was. I couldn't sleep after the upsetting call with my father-in-law. I quickly took a bath and dressed in a sari.

While I was making breakfast, Ashok called me.

"Hello."

"Yes?"

"Amma's flight is delayed by three hours. I am at the fucking airport. If my father Desikacharya, the bastard, calls, tell him," he said in a drunken drawl.

"Okay," I replied.

God. He's drunk. I just hoped he sobered up before his mother arrived or else there would be another conference call from the inquisition squad in India. I tried to divert my mind away from worrying images of Ashok drunk and merry, while my mother-in-law, vivid with anger, tried to pin his vice on me.

I quickly prepared lunch and decided to go and meet my friend Diana.

Diana owned a restaurant right around the block. We became friends three years ago. I had been in the neighborhood park, brooding over my hopeless situation and crying. I didn't notice anyone and no one bothered me. I didn't know how long I sat there. Suddenly I felt a hand comforting me. It was Diana. She said that she had been watching me for a long time.

"There, there, dear. Don't cry."

I poured my heart out to her. Sometimes it is easier to talk to strangers. Things that I had kept hidden from my mother and sister tumbled out of my mouth. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. I was glad that, in this strange country, I had Diana to fall back on to.

I made *paneer pakoras* for her to taste. She loved Indian snacks, especially *samosas*, and was forever asking me to give her recipes to try. I wrapped the *pakoras* in aluminum foil and went to the restaurant.

Diana is around forty with gray eyes, blonde hair and a lovely dimple. She was writing something in her notebook when I entered. She looked up and smiled at me. I sat beside her and waited until she finished and gave her the *paneer pakoras* to taste.

“Hmmm. Very nice, Nithya. I am thinking of adding a couple of Indian snacks to the menu. There has been a noticeable increase in Indian customers here,” she said, eating the *pakoras* with relish. “How about it Nithya? You can make this stuff from home and send it around to the restaurant. I’ll pay cash. What do you say?” she asked.

I felt relieved. Diana’s suggestion seemed God-sent but I also wanted it to be my ticket out of the house.

“My mother-in-law is coming from India today. So, most likely she’ll take over the kitchen. I can come here and make the snacks, if you don’t mind. How about that?” I asked.

She seemed pleased to hear that. “Sounds better. We can serve them hot. Great. So how long is your mother-in-law here?”

“For about three months I think. She might leave earlier if my sister-in-law’s marriage is arranged,” I said.

“I still can’t understand why you won’t leave him. Divorces are also common in India. My Indian friend Malathi is divorced and happy.”

I bit my lip while I pondered her question. She never really understood why a younger sister would have trouble getting married if the older sister got divorced.

“Ashok and I have an agreement. I can’t back off now,” I said morosely.

She scowled and pursed her lips as she considered my situation.

“What agreement? He’s just taking advantage of you. Can’t you see that? And have you thought of what you want to do, once you go back to India?” she asked.

I have thought about nothing else in all my time here. And in my daydreams, I had a successful catering business, a cafeteria and a nice flat where my mother wouldn’t have to worry about the state of the roof during the rains.

I looked directly at her and said, “I want to go back to India and start a restaurant like yours. I’ve studied hotel management.”

She seemed pleased with my decision.

“That’s good. At least you have a definite plan. So when is your sister getting married? Does she like anyone?” she asked.

Despite having many Indian friends, Diana never really understood the concept of arranged marriages. We had several interesting conversations and arguments about how people get married in India after one or two meetings.

“My sister just completed her engineering degree. Next month she will be joining Wipro. She will need some time to get settled in her job,” I said.

“That could be another three to four years. What about Ashok’s sister? How old is she?” she asked pondering deeply over my situation.

“She is twenty-two years old. They are actively looking for a match. My mother-in-law wants Ashok to find someone for her from the US. But he is not very keen,” I said.

“I’m not surprised. So you are going to lead this sham life for the next four years. Do you think it is worth it?” she asked me directly.

I was afraid to answer that. She was right. It was not worth it. But I just needed to *pretend* that everything was fine until Divya got married. That’s all.



FOUR

The first time I heard anything about my marriage was when I was fourteen years old. My uncle Narasimhachari and aunt Kanakavali loved to match-make. They rarely thought about the wishes of the boy and girl. Ever since Chittappa retired from the army, he had cultivated a couple of hobbies; one was to match-make along with his gossipy wife and the other was to show people how deeply religious and charitable he was. The first proposal that they had in mind for me was to marry his brother's son Vasu.

Vasu was an orphan. His parents died in an accident and my uncle became his guardian since there was nobody else to take him in. He was brought to live in my uncle's house with his cousin. My uncle financed his studies until the twelfth standard and then suggested that he go to *patashala* to study for priesthood and get married to me. We both were made for each other, with Vasu becoming a priest and me a cook; we would be the ideal low class couple, according to my uncle.

I was horrified. I had never thought of Vasu as a potential husband. We were friends, mates and companions who had suffered the generous condescending gestures of Chittappa. While I suffered silently, Vasu was not inclined to be quiet. He did *not* want to become a priest. I was not sure how he felt about marrying me as we never talked about it. He left the house after his twelfth standard results were out and never came back.

My uncle was very angry. It was the first time one of his plans had gone awry and somebody actually had the courage to stand up to him. He had a big face-off with Sridhar, who had come to persuade him to let Vasu work with him. Sridhar even offered to take up the cost of Vasu's education. But it was no use. After Vasu left the house, I found out that Chittappa had told all his relatives that he had stolen some money from home, hence his hasty departure.

The last thing that I heard about Vasu was that he was working with Sridhar and had moved to Mumbai and was very successful. Sridhar was a businessman dealing with computers and Vasu used to work with him part-time, assembling computers during his summer holidays. Thankfully, after he left, there was no more talk of my marriage. When I

completed my twelfth standard, my uncle wanted me to start working. I was heartbroken but my mother met an old friend of my father's, and asked him for help. He agreed to finance my education and Divya's as well. This, again, had not gone down well with my uncle.

It was the final year of my college and I had come to my uncle's house to help my mother make the yearly portion of *appalam* and *vadam* for my uncle and aunt. While we were preparing the sheets for the *vadam*, my uncle came to the terrace and told me his plans for my future.

"Nithya, yesterday I was speaking to Chinnu *mama*. He is looking for an apprentice for his cooking team. You will learn a lot from him. He is a top cook nowadays and he is always in demand for marriages and other functions. He said you could help him by cutting vegetables, cleaning utensils and clearing tables. He will pay you three thousand rupees for a marriage and a thousand rupees for other functions. You can start working for him from next month. His only condition is that you will have to wear a *madisar*," he said with a flourish.

Then he had turned towards his wife who was adjusting the sheets and said, "Kanaka, give your old cotton *madisars* to Nithya. She can wear them when she goes to work with Chinnu."

I had looked at my mother who was silently watching my uncle. She could not and would not say anything.

"Chittappa, three of my friends have started a catering business from their home. I want to join them. They already have eight clients, all software companies to whom they are supplying food. They want me to join them. My monthly salary will be eight thousand rupees."

"Nonsense, Nithya. I know you. Don't aim too high. It won't work. I think you are lucky to get this job, that too because of my recommendation. This job is perfect for you. Don't dream too big. Just because you studied hotel management it doesn't mean that you will open a hotel," he said, dismissing my decision.

"Chittappa, please. I want to...."

My mother intervened and said, "Nithya, help me with this."

I looked at her steadily but she was not looking at me. We got busy with the *vadam* and *appalam* and my uncle went down. I wanted to protest this decision, but my aunt was there. She took up the discussion from where my uncle had left.

“Amruthi, do you know how much money Chinnu makes with marriages? Almost two *lakhs* for each marriage. If Nithya works with him, he will also find a good match for her. We thought Vasu would be perfect for her but he turned out to be a wastrel.” My mother and I were stoically silent until she went down. And then I burst out.

“Amma. I will *not* work with Chinnu *mama*. I want to take up this catering job. If it means that we will be thrown out of that house then so be it. I can support us with my salary,” I said vehemently.

“Nithya, stop it. In the first place you shouldn’t have told him that you want to take up another job. You should have told him that it is an internship or something for a year after which you will get your graduation certificate.”

“Oh. Why didn’t I think of that?” My mother knew her survival techniques well.

“You go ahead with your catering job. I will tell your aunt that you will not get the certificate unless you work with these people,” she said calmly.

“Thank God,” I had said, relieved.

We finished laying out the *vadams* and then went down. My uncle was on the *verandah* talking to a friend of his. They looked up when I came out.

“Chittappa, I am leaving now. I have to go to college today.”

He called me, and holding my hand, introduced me to his friend.

“Desika, this is my wife’s sister’s daughter Nithya. Her father died leaving them with a big debt. I gave them the small house that we have near the temple tank and paid for their education.”

He must have said this a million times to so many people. And each time, I grew small with shame.

My uncle’s friend surveyed me from top to bottom. I greeted his friend and escaped as fast as I could. Desikachari was Ashok’s father. I guess after I left, he asked for my hand. He had been on the look out for a demure, non-independent beautiful girl for his son and I fit the bill perfectly.

