

FOUR

When Konkana looked out of her window the next day, she saw Malini sitting alone in the garden. Her face was drawn, and she had been very quiet since they returned from their city tour. Locking her room, Konkana gingerly went down the stairs and into the garden, in order to try to lift her friend's spirits.

“What is bothering you Malini? You can confide in me if you feel like. Think of me as your elder sister,” Konkana said gently to the younger woman.

Malini gave a whimper. She remembered her elder sister. If Nalini had been there today none of this would have happened. A tear rolled out, followed by another, and another. Soon it became a deluge as she broke down. Konkana patiently waited for Malini to calm down, holding her hand and reassuring her that she could trust her.

“What I am going to tell you comes from the darkest confines of my heart. Something that only my husband knew.” Malini had calmed down after drinking the chilled water that Konkana had brought for her. She was grateful to have found a support like Konkana. And it was the warmth that Konkana exuded that made Malini want to open her heart to her.

December 1967, Kumbakonam

Eighteen year-old Malini sat in front of Goddess Mangalambika's shrine in the ancient Kumbheswarar temple, singing the *Thiruppavai*. It was *Margazhi* month, and the whole town of Kumbakonam was up at

four in the morning. The entrance of every home and temple, even some shops, were decorated with large *rangolis*. Women in *madisars* and girls in *pavadais* were out on the streets, going to or returning from the temples, giving the whole town a splash of color and silky shine. The aroma of sweet *pongal*, dripping with *ghee* competed with the fragrance of jasmines and roses. Many people came to the temple just to get a handful of this dish, which was offered as *prasad* to the Goddess.

Nalini sat a few feet away from Malini, expertly stringing jasmine flowers, her hands positioning the jasmines, two at a time, looping the thread and knotting it over the flowers deftly. Her hands worked of their own accord while her head swayed ever so gently to her sister's music.

A few other visitors to the shrine were also seated around Malini, lost in her lilting voice. A mango colored silk *pavadai* and a maroon half sari draped around her, Malini was as beautiful as her voice. Her glossy waist length hair was plaited neatly and had a string of jasmines woven through it. Outside the temple it was still dark, but the shrine was bright with golden colored bulbs.

As the *Thiruppavai* came to an end, the temple priest rose to offer *mangala-arathi* to the goddess. Nalini handed him the garland she had made, and he hung it around the Goddess's neck. Everyone stood up for the *archana* and *mangala-arathi*. The sound of Vedas chanted by the priest and ringing of the bell in his hand rose to a crescendo, showering the devotees with a downpour of devotion. When the ringing and chants came to an end, everyone took the much-awaited sweet *pongal prasad* and dispersed. Malini remained standing in front of the inner sanctum, deeply immersed in prayer.

“*Amma Thaye Mangalambika!* Please let tomorrow’s math paper be easy enough for me to pass the subject!” She pleaded with the Goddess silently. The sound of someone clearing their throat made her open her eyes and look up. Nalini, who knew what her sister was praying, signaled Malini to look beside her. Malini turned.

A man, presumably in his twenties, clad in a pure white shirt and *dhoti* with sacred ash smeared on his forehead was standing a few feet away, gaping at her with his palms folded.

Malini tried hard to suppress a giggle at the sight of a small string of jasmine hanging from his ears. She nodded to her sister, and they both walked out of the shrine, ignoring the young man. Once outside, both the sisters burst out laughing.

“*Akka!* What a *pazham!*” Malini commented through the giggles. However, the laugh on Nalini's face had frozen. Malini turned around to see why. The same young man they had seen in the shrine was standing behind her.

“*Achacho!*” She hoped he had not heard her comment.

“What does *pazham* mean?” The man asked with an innocent face. Malini shook her head hastily.

“No no...I was talking...eh...a...about the f...fruits kept for *prasadam*. They looked very r...ripe..,” she stammered. “Isn't it *Akka?*” She looked at Nalini desperately for help. Nalini nodded, words refusing to come out of her mouth.

“Oh I see!” The man nodded, with a twinkle in his eyes. “Err...you sang beautifully. Such devotion at such a young age! And how serene you looked when you meditated!” Malini wondered when she had meditated. Then realized with amusement that her pleading to the goddess may have looked like meditation to this man. But who was he? The man had a well-set face and a dark bushy mustache. She could not take her eyes off him. Waves of electricity passed through Malini's body and her cheeks turned a fiery red.

Lowering her eyes, she muttered a barely audible, “Thanks” and ran away, with Nalini following her, snickering.

The next day, Malini kept seeing the same man again and again. Sometimes near the banyan tree at the beginning of her street, sometimes near her college. On the first day Malini thought it was a coincidence, and did not pay much attention to him. She did notice however, that the man had been staring at her.

The next day however, Malini grew a bit tense. Who was this person and why was he following her? She felt scared and thrilled at the same time. Thrilled that she was getting his attention, for he was a handsome man and made Malini want to turn and steal looks at him whenever possible. Scared because her upbringing said this was a wrong thing to do. Her *Athai* who lived with them had told her umpteen stories about girls being ruined by strange boys. It is a big bad world out there, she had been told, with a lot of men prowling around like wolves, ready to pounce upon naive prey at any moment. She had to be careful, she had been warned.

But in the next few days she could not help looking for the man on her way to and from college. Her eyes would scan the spot she had seen him the previous day. If she didn't find him, the disappointment showed plainly in her eyes. When she did find him, she lowered her eyes quickly, blood rushing through her veins. She walked rapidly past him, her heart beating in tune with her feet.

A few days after their first encounter with the man from the temple, Malini spoke about him to Nalini. They were on the bed, side by side, indulging in general chit-chat before falling asleep.

“This man seems to be following me, *Akka!*” Malini said in a scandalous tone.

“*Oho!* So you finally found an admirer for yourself is it?” Nalini quipped.

“*Po Akka.* I am so nervous. I don't know what to do... shall I tell *Anna* about him?” Malini asked, even though she knew she didn't want to.

“*Podi.* Why would you want to spoil your fun? Is he harming you in anyway? Just let him be. I am sure he will go away in a few days,” Nalini advised.

“What if he doesn't?” The thought of this man going away brought on an unexpected twinge of disappointment.

“Well...first let's see if he doesn't.” And Nalini turned to the other side and went to sleep. Malini closed her eyes and tried to recall the trigonometric equations she had studied for her test the next day. All she could recall however, was the look in the man's eyes when they met hers.

Agitated, Malini kept tossing and turning in her bed, till sleep finally overcame her.

The next afternoon, Malini sat under the banyan tree which marked her street. In her hand were her test paper with angry red lines scored through it. Six out of fifty, she could not believe that she had done so badly. She remembered the long hours spent working on problems; all her effort for nothing. Her throat went dry as she imagined the prospect of showing her paper to her father. *Appa* always insisted on seeing all her papers. Even now, after she had joined college. She didn't resent it much, for most of her scores met with his approval except mathematics. Somehow, math eluded her, no matter how hard she tried.

Narayanamurthy was sitting in the *pyol* reading the day's newspaper. She had just crossed him and stepped into the portico, when his voice came from behind the newspaper, "Have your answer sheets come?" Malini's *Athai* came out hearing footsteps, and took Malini's bag from her hands.

"*Anna*, the poor girl has just come in," she reprimanded, "please give her time to freshen up at least!" Though she was his younger sister, Malini's father could not overrule *Rajamma Athai* in matters concerning the girls or the home.

Rajamma was fifty-five, and the silver lines that had started to appear on her head were becoming more and more prominent. There was no *mangalyam* on her neck. She never had the opportunity to have a man tie it for her. There had been extensive search for a prospective husband for *Rajamma*, but her horoscope had been full of dire predictions for the one who would marry her, and so most of the proposals that came never proceeded beyond the horoscope matching stage. Her parents and brothers had been so busy with horoscopes and almanacs that they never noticed the lines of age that started to appear on her face.

One fine day, when the horoscope of one man finally matched hers, reality struck them with all its might. The boy who came to look at *Rajamma* rejected her on account of her looking older than him. That fastened the lock on the bridegroom search for *Rajamma* and she busied herself in household chores.

Malini washed, changed and ate her evening tiffin. After wiping her hands she took her exam papers from her bag and approached her father with trepidation. She handed him the papers, the one with highest scores on the top and math at the bottom. Her father glanced at the marks written on the top of each subject and put them aside with a nod. When the last subject came, he stopped, and glanced at Malini. A look of disappointment, which made Malini lower her head with regret.

“Here I am making big plans about your future, and you bring me this. What am I to do? It is my fate that my dreams cannot come true in this life.” Her father was extremely strict as far as her studies were concerned.

“I am really sorry, *pa*. I am finding mathematics especially hard. If you could allow me to go to tuition like other students of my class do, then I am sure I would improve.” Malini’s friends went to a tuition class near the banks of Kaveri, which ran through Kumbakonam. They usually hung out together after the classes on the sandy bank. Malini would listen to the tales they narrated about what a good time they had or how good the *jalebis* from the stalls on the bank were. All through her childhood Malini had never been eager to roam or cross the line her father had drawn for the girls, but youth had sparked a desire inside her to have fun like her classmates.

“I have already told you it is not safe. The place is near the river. All sorts of people come there in the evening. I don't want you going there. Your grades will improve if you put in more effort, which is what you don't do. Without effort, no tuition can help you, understood?” Narayanamurthy's stern voice left her with no scope for retaliation.

Just then Nalini walked into the house, adjusting a string of jasmines in her plait. “Where were you Nalini? You have been gone for nearly four hours!” Her father questioned her sharply.

“I was in the temple *Appa*. They are decorating the Goddess with flowers, so I was stringing the flowers. Nearly five baskets of jasmines, roses and marigolds. Oh! My hands are aching,” she flexed her arms and moaned.

“Okay, okay. Go drink some coffee and rest,” her father said, and went into his room. Nalini was mixing milk into her coffee when Malini walked into the kitchen.

“So, helping at the temple, eh?” Malini asked her, a smirk playing at the corner of her lips.

“Yeah! Why do you ask? Do you think I am lying?” Nalini replied with indignation.

“No, no, no...how can you be lying? Although, tell me one thing. If you were in the temple, how come so much sand is sticking to your *pavadai*? Have they sprinkled the temple floors with sand?” Malini raised one eyebrow and looked intently at her elder sister.

Nalini choked on her coffee. Her eyes grew wide for an instant, then she put on a defiant expression. “I...I fell down near the outer wall of the temple. The place does have sand, for your information.” She walked out of the kitchen taking her coffee tumbler as Malini looked on silently. There was something her elder sister was not telling her. What could it be?

