

Ayah

A tropical night, the sky a heavy navy curtain lit up by the silvery stars. But she is too tired to look up. She walks in, locks the flimsy door. She takes in the scene, her one room outhouse with the asbestos roof still too hot to sleep in. She lies on the charpoy under the stars, a much cooler option. Her chores for the day are done, she puts her weary head on the pillow but her mind starts racing. Anjali's wedding was looming ahead, how was she going to meet the expenses? I must ask the mistress in the morning. Sleep closed her tired eyes.

I watch her as she draws the most intricate pattern of *rangoli* on the freshly cleaned veranda. It's half past five in the morning, the quietest time of the day, the coolest, and the sun lazily peering out. Ayah adjusts her thin sari, tweaks the rice flour of the *rangoli* pattern into perfect shape and moves on to her next chore. The cook is busy. The smell of freshly roasted coffee beans rises up. The cook turns the coffee grinder with gusto, a sound one cannot miss. The milk boils as he prepares the 'decoction'.

The aroma of fresh coffee fills the air. Dad is busy reading the *Hindu* newspaper, waiting for his coffee. The driver arrives, the Ayah runs in to get the car key. He hurries away to start cleaning the car. The morning bustle starts like bubbles frothing up. I reach for my dissertation. I need to complete it soon. The deadline for submission is scarily near.

Ayah hands me the coffee and waits, smiling.

'Amma, I've got some good news this morning. I want to tell you first.'

'What is it?'

'Anjali is getting married.'

'What! Anjali? Isn't she too young? She is years younger than me.'

'She is already 16 years old. Nearly 4 years since she matured, my relatives will be unhappy if I let her remain unmarried.'

'Have you stopped her from going to school then?'

'Oh yes, last year. It was not a good thing to let her out. Too many boys were eyeing her up.'

'When did you arrange it then?'

'Just last week, the wedding date has been finalised. She has been home, learning to cook and clean.'

'Ayah, why didn't you mention this before?'

'You were all so busy with your sister's wedding I couldn't bother you with all my business.'

'Mum, Mum' I shout excitedly, 'Did you hear? Anjali is getting married!' I run to the veranda. Mum is chatting quietly to Dad as he tries to read the paper.

'What? Mum starts up. 'That's great news, Ayah, soon after our Gita's wedding too. Tell me all about it. Who is the boy?'

'Amma, he is from our village, my brothers have arranged it.'

'Your brothers? They were no good when you had all the problems, Ayah.'

'I have to listen to them, Amma, as I am a widow. The males in the family make all the important decisions.'

'So where is this boy working?'

Ayah shuffled a bit. 'He is in the village, he works on the land.'
'Not a landless labourer, Ayah, Anjali has lived all her life in the city, how could you?'
'Amma, he is her '*murai pillai*' chosen from birth, I can't go against the family tradition.'
'How will she adjust to a life in the village? Are the family good?'
'I know very little about them, my brothers arranged it all.'
Ayah, why didn't you tell me? We have boys in our company who are smart, working and earning well.'
'Amma, my brothers would not agree to anyone but Muthu. It is a family tradition to marry as arranged since our birth.'
'Well, I had no idea...'
Ayah smiled sweetly. 'Amma, about the wedding expenses... nearly 10,000 rupees...'
'Of course, I'll get it sorted for you, though I can't give you the whole lot. I'll talk to the master. Some will be a loan that you'll have to repay.'
'Thank you, Amma, You've been like God to me.' Ayah seems about to fall at my mum's feet and mum stops her from doing that, with a wave of her hand.
'Ayah, bring Anjali over. We must give our blessing to the young bride.'
'Yes Amma, I'll bring her tomorrow...' The door is flung wide open, Gita comes barging in, throws herself at mum, 'Oh I hate that house, I wish I was back home!'

Melodramatic, that's my sister. Perfectly made up, only the best for her. Designer jeans, diamond solitaire glinting in the morning sun, leather Italian sandals.

'Now what's the matter?' Mum's whole attention immediately switches to Gita.
'Mum they expect me to do some housework. I am not used to it. I am not going back, how can they expect me to wash the dishes and cut the vegetables? I didn't marry Ashok to be a maid did I?'
'Gita, servants do need time off, surely you can help out.' Only then does Gita notice Ayah hovering around.
'Ayah, get me some lemon sherbet, I'm parched, and turn the AC on, it's so hot.'

Gita's memsahib voice is crisp.

'Yes Gita'ma' nods Ayah as she hurries away to do what she is told.
'Mum you only take their side,' Gita now a little more composed is checking her elegant watch.
'Gita are you happy with Ashok?'
'Of course, I love him. I just hate living with his family, why can't they get more maids? Mum, why don't I take Anjali, she'll be perfect help for me?'
'Gita you are unbelievable. Anjali is getting married and moving away.'
'What! She's too young, married oh, the poor thing. Just find me a new maid mum, I can't stand it. I won't have any time for socialising if my mother-in-law has her way.' She tosses her glossy black hair and smooths it back.
'Well, I'll ask around, it's not easy to find young maids who are reliable. I also need to talk to your mother-in-law, she may not like it.'

As usual mum does whatever Gita wants. Pleased with having achieved her goal, she turns to me. I am conscious of my old pyjamas and tee shirt, comfort clothes to work in.

‘How’s my little sister then, still with your head in books? Anita, by the way I’ve seen a beautiful jewellery set. Jade with silver. It will be great with my new green sari, will you come with me? I want to get it today’

‘No, I need to work on my dissertation’ I said. I hated her perfection, her superficial life, yet she was my sister and I could not ignore her.

‘You’re such a bore. I’ll call Sushma, she loves jewellery shopping’ Gita went off to call up her friend. Spending money was her way out of anything.

I tried to work on my dissertation. Memories came flooding in. Anjali and I were playmates. She would join me when we were little as we chased the sparrows, plucked jasmine flowers from the garden, ate mangoes and grimaced at the sour taste. The ‘*mali*’ would let us have a go at the hand pump and we would water the garden. She was a tomboy like me, taking part in the cricket games that my brothers played. The boys would always use us as fielders, giving very little chance to bat or bowl. I remembered how I stood up to the boys and demanded we were allowed to bat. Anjali stood by me; being a maid and younger she had very little say.

But that bond of playing together was special. Gita my sister did not like to get her clothes dirty, she preferred to watch TV or play with dolls. Anjali was part of my childhood, a happy time. Those innocent days flashed past so quickly. I was whisked off in the chauffeur-driven car to the exclusive private convent school. Anjali attended the municipal school. We still played together occasionally on a Sunday, but our lives soon moved in completely different circles. As we grew up our relationship changed subtly. Anjali helped in the house when she finished at school, put the fan or AC on, took care of my clothes, ran short errands for us. Being away from home for my university I had not noticed that Anjali had not been around the house. Like all the other maids she was totally at our beck and call all through Gita’s wedding. Gita’s wedding, lasting three days, took six months to organise. Nothing else mattered. It absorbed all our waking days.