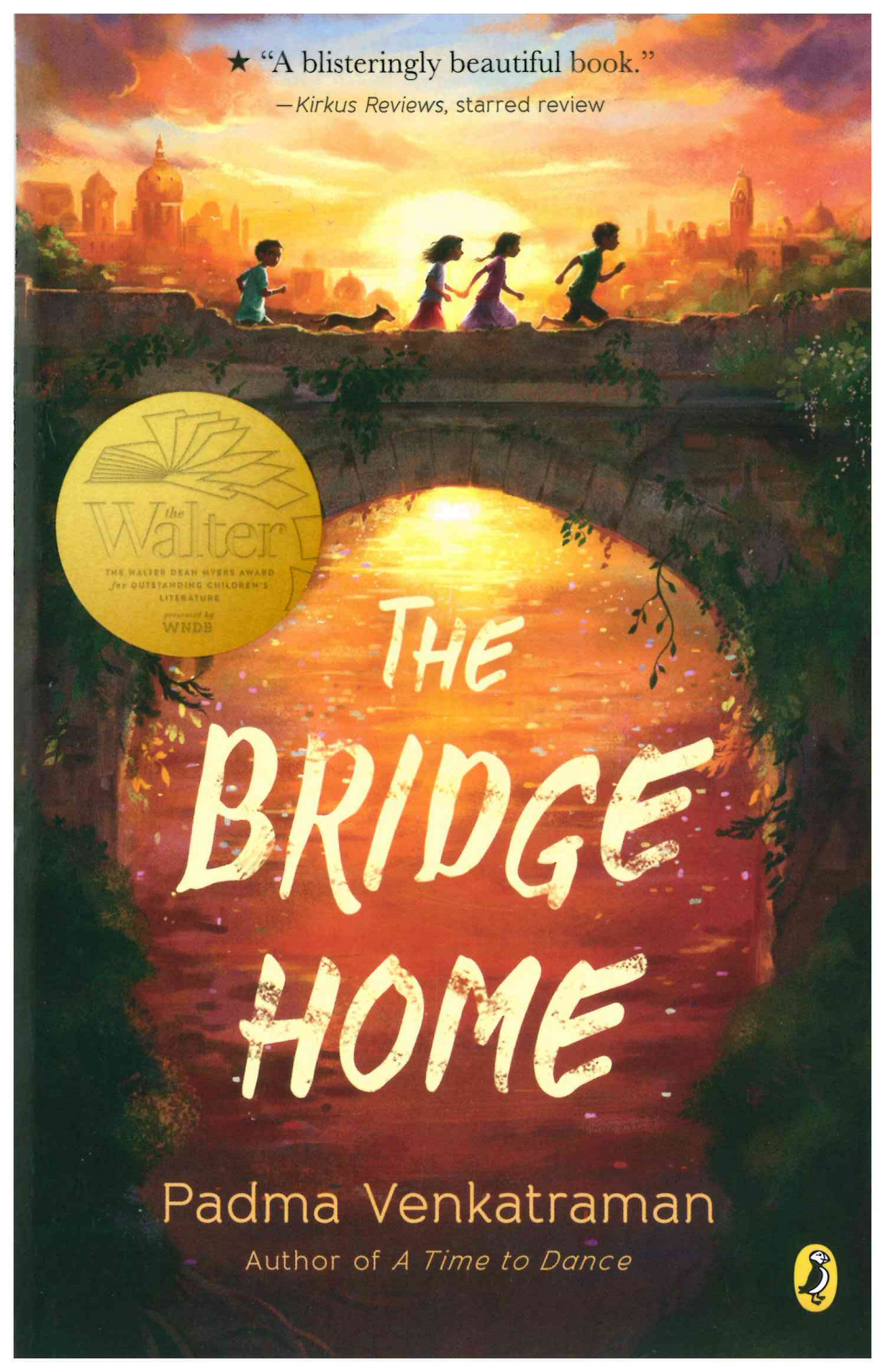
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THE BRIDGE HOME
Padma Venkatraman
Author of A Time to Dance

THE BRIDGE HOME

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CONTENTS

GLOSSARY

aamaam: yes

akka: older sister

amma: mother

appa: father

aunty: a term of respect used for older women; often used as part of their name

biryani: a spicy rice dish

Divali: a major Hindu holiday, the "festival of lights," that takes place in late October or November

Ganesha: a Hindu God with a man's body and an elephant's head, considered, among other things, a patron of wisdom and learning

gulab jamun: sweet, deep-fried balls made of a milk-based dough and soaked in rose-flavored syrup

illam: house or home

kolam: a decorative pattern made from rice flour sprinkled on the ground

kurta: a type of tunic

laddu: a round confection, usually served at celebrations and holidays

murukku: a crispy snack made of lentil flour shaped into spirals and deep fried

nadhaswaram: a double-reed wind instrument that sounds a little like a saxophone

paavum: poor thing

pakora: fritters made by dipping vegetables in batter and frying them

pavadai: a type of skirt

payasam: pudding made with rice or vermicelli-type noodles

rakshasi: a female demon

rasam: a spicy and watery sauce usually served over rice and often made with tomato and lentils

roti: Indian flatbread

rupee: the currency in India, worth much less than a dollar

sari: a traditional Indian dress consisting of a piece of cloth that is wrapped elegantly around the body

vadai: a type of lentil fritter

vanakkam: a greeting

1

TOGETHERNESS

Talking to you was always easy, Rukku. But writing's hard.

"Write her a letter," Celina Aunty said, laying a sheet of paper on the desk. Paper remade from wilted, dirty, hopeless litter that had been rescued, scrubbed clean, and reshaped. Even the pencil she gave me was made from scraps.

"You really like saving things, don't you?" I said.

Crinkly lines softened her stern face. "I don't like giving up," she said.

She rested her dark hand, warm and heavy, on my shoulder.

"Why should I write?" I said. "It's not like you have her address."

"I believe your words will reach her," Celina Aunty said.

"We're opposites," I said. "You believe in everything and everybody. You're full of faith."

"Yes," she said. "But you're full, too. You're full of feelings you won't share and thoughts you won't voice."

She's right about that. I don't talk to anyone here any more than I have to. The only person I want to talk to is you, Rukku.

Maybe writing to you is the next best thing.

If you could read my words, what would you want me to tell you?

I suppose you'd like to hear the fairy tale you'd make me tell every night we huddled together on the ruined bridge. The story that began with *Once upon a time, two sisters ruled a magical land,* and ended with *Viji and Rukku, always together.*

That story was made up, of course.

Not that you'd care whether it was true or not. For you, things were real that the rest of us couldn't see or hear.

When I finished the story, you'd say, "Viji and Rukku together?"

"Always." I was confident.

Our togetherness was one of the few things I had faith in.

2

ROTTEN FRUIT

You always felt like a younger sister, Rukku. You looked younger, too, with your wide eyes and snub nose. You spoke haltingly, and you hunched your shoulders, which made you seem smaller than me, though you were born a year before.

Born when our father was a nice man, I suppose, because Amma said he was nice. Before.

Imagining Appa "before" took a lot of imagining. I was a good imaginer, but even so, I couldn't imagine him all the way nice.

The best I could do was think of him as a not-yet-all-the-way-rotten fruit. A plump yellow mango with just a few ugly bruises.

I could imagine our mother picking him out, the way she'd pick fruit from the grocer's stall, choosing the overripe fruit he was happy to give her for free. I could see Amma looking Appa

over, hoping that if certain foul bits could be cut away, then sweetness, pure sweetness, would be left behind.

Because Amma did choose him. Their marriage wasn't arranged.

Somehow he charmed her, charmed her away from her family, with whom she lost all touch. They were ashamed, she told me, ashamed and angry with her for eloping with someone from an even lower caste than the one she'd been born into.

It was all she ever said about her family. Not their names or where they lived or how many brothers and sisters she had. Only that they wanted nothing to do with us. And Appa's family—if he had one—didn't seem to know we existed either.

Sometimes I wonder if they might have helped us if they'd known. But maybe they'd have done nothing, or acted like our neighbors and schoolmates, who did worse than nothing. Who sniggered or made rude comments when we walked past. Comments that upset you so much, you stooped even lower than usual, so low it looked like you wanted to hide your head inside your chest.

On my eleventh birthday, when we came home from school, I was surprised to see saucepans full of food simmering on the stove.

"Amma, you cooked!" I loved evenings when Amma felt strong enough to prepare dinner for us, instead of the other way around. "You even made payasam?" I inhaled the sweet scent of milk rice that wafted through our apartment.

"Not just that." Amma dug out a small money pouch from its hiding place, underneath the rice sack. "Here's two hundred rupees, for you to buy something for yourself."

"Two hundred rupees!" I was so astonished that I almost dropped the pouch before securing it to my ankle-length skirt.

"I've been saving a little of what Appa gives me for food and rent. I wanted to buy something, but I was too tired to go shopping for a gift, and I wasn't sure what you'd like."

"This is the best gift, Amma. Thanks."

"Sweet?" you said. "Sweets for Rukku?"

"Proper food first," Amma said. "For you both."

Amma heaped rice onto our plates and ladled some hot, spicy rasam over the top. She started eating, but you just stared at your food, your hands crossed over your chest.

"Come on, Rukku." I tried to feed you a spoonful of rice and rasam.

"No!" you yelled. "Sweet! Sweeeeet!"

"Don't get angry, Rukku. Please? Eat and I'll tell you a story tonight."

"Story?" You calmed down.

Amma looked at me gratefully.

We'd just finished our dinner when we heard Appa's heavy footsteps. The sound of him staggering up the stairs to our apartment told us all we needed to know.

"Get in your room. Quick," Amma said.

"Sweet," you moaned, but your hand met mine and we crept into our bedroom. In the darkness, we huddled together,

unable to block out the sound of Appa yelling at Amma. We rocked back and forth, taking comfort in each other's warmth.

Appa broke Amma's arm that night, before storming out of the house.

"I need to see a doctor," Amma came and told us. Her voice was tight with pain. "Stay with Rukku. If they see her—"

She didn't finish her sentence. She didn't need to. She'd told me a million times how scared she was that if you set foot in a hospital, the doctors might lock you away in "a mental institution."

You curled up on our mattress with your wooden doll, Marapachi. I smoothed your brow.

The patch of moonlight that slipped past the rusty iron bars on our window fell on the book that our teacher, Parvathi, had given me before she moved away. No other teacher had ever been so nice, even though I was often at the top of the class.

I opened the book. In a shaking voice, I read you a tale about a poor, low-caste girl who'd refused to accept the life others thought she should lead.

"You think we could change our lives, like that girl did?" I asked. "And Parvathi Teacher. And Subbu. Or at least his family. They all left for a better life in a big city."

Subbu had been the only friend we'd had in school. His long face and thin frame had made him look as weak as a blade of grass, but he'd always told off the other children who teased us.

"I miss him, Rukku. Think he ever misses us?"

You answered me with a snore.

I was glad you'd fallen asleep, but I stayed awake, worrying and hoping. I hoped Amma would finally tell someone about how she had been hurt, and that they'd swoop down and rescue us.

But I should have known she'd never tell.

3

BREAKING

The next day, Amma pretended like nothing had happened.

You never pretended.

"Owwa," you announced. You patted our mother's good arm and stroked the sling on the broken one.

When Appa came home that evening, his eyes bloodshot and his breath reeking as usual, he set packages wrapped in newspaper on the cracked kitchen counter. "Presents for my girls."

"How nice!" Amma's voice was full of false cheer.

"Sorry I lost my temper last night." He placed a finger on her chin. "I'll never do it again. Promise."

I saw hope creep into Amma's eyes. Desperate, useless hope.

Suddenly, I wanted to shout at her, more than at him. *Have you forgotten how often he's broken his promises?*

He ripped open one of the packages and dangled a pair of

bangles in front of you. But before your fingers could close over them, he jerked them away.

"Catch!" He launched one bangle over your head, and as you slowly raised your hands to try to catch it, he sent the other flying so fast, it struck you before tinkling to the floor.

You squeaked like a trapped mouse.

He laughed.

How dare he think it was funny to trick you. How dare he mock your trust.

When he tossed a package in my direction, I didn't even try to catch it. I crossed my arms and watched it land on the floor.

"How bad both our girls are at catching!" Amma's voice was high-pitched and tense as a taut string.

"Stupid," he said. "One with slow hands, and the other with a slow brain."

"We're not stupid!" I picked up my package and flung it at him.

Nostrils flaring, he slapped me.

"Please," Amma begged. "Not the children."

You leaped and thrust your doll between me and Appa.

He kicked out at you.

At you.

Furious, I lunged at him. You joined in, and the two of us barreled into him together. He swayed and fell backward, but not before he struck your face.

Amma caught him, instead of letting him crack his head on the floor.

"Let them be," she pleaded.

Appa grunted.

I was sure he'd come at us again, but instead, he crawled into their bedroom and passed out for the night.

You ran a finger around the edges of what felt like a painful bruise blooming on my cheek. "Owwa," you said, paying no attention to your own wound. "Poor Viji."

With her unbroken arm, Amma grabbed a towel. She dipped it into the cool water in our earthen pot and pressed it against your bleeding lip. You struggled until I promised it would help you heal.

"Leave Appa," I told Amma. "Let's go somewhere else."

"How would we live, Viji?"

"We'll find a way."

"We can't manage without him. No one employs uneducated women with no skills." Her voice was flat. Defeated. "Just don't talk back anymore, Viji. I couldn't stand it if he hurt you again."

"He hurts you all the time," I said. "And now that he's started on us, nothing's going to stop him."

She didn't argue. Her head drooped, and when she finally found the strength to lift her eyes to mine, I could see she knew what I'd said was true.

"I can't bear seeing you hurt, but how can I stop him?" She gazed at the pictures of the Gods and Goddesses smiling down

serenely from our kitchen wall. As if they'd suddenly leap into life and start helping.

"Please understand, Viji." She was begging me, the same pathetic way she'd begged Appa. "I promised . . . to be a good wife . . . no matter what. I can't leave."

But after what he'd done to you, I couldn't stay.

As I gazed at Amma's trembling chin, I realized how different we were. Amma trusted that if she put up with things, she'd be rewarded with another, better life after she died. It made no sense to me why any God who made us suffer in this life would start caring for us in the next.

If I wanted a better future, I needed to change the life we had. Now.

The more I thought about our differences, the surer I felt that I could protect you better than she could. She hadn't tried to stop Appa from beating us. All she'd done was beg. I would never become like her, I promised myself. I'd never beg anyone for anything.

At the first light of dawn, while Amma and Appa slept, I woke and changed into my best blouse and ankle-length pavadai as silently as I could. Around my waist, I tied the drawstring purse with Amma's gift of money. Then I crammed a sheet, some towels, and a change of clothes for each of us into our school backpacks. I added a bar of soap, a comb, and the pink plastic

jar of tooth powder to your bag; from the kitchen, I grabbed a bunch of bananas—your favorite fruit—to add to mine.

Our bags were heavy, but I couldn't bear to leave behind the book from Parvathi Teacher. Carrying it along was like taking her blessings with us, I told myself as I forced it into my bag.

Then I woke you.

"Shhup. Don't say a word, Rukku, please. Just get changed. We're leaving."

Sleep weighed down your eyelids, but you did as I asked. Perhaps it felt like a dream to you.

As we shuffled toward the front door, you cast a bewildered glance at our parents' bedroom.

"Amma?" you said.

Memories of our rare happy moments gleamed in my mind, like sunshine slipping into a dark room: the day Amma had helped you make a bead necklace, the night she'd sat by our beds and listened to the story I'd told you.

For a moment I hesitated. But then I glanced at your cut lip—the proof Appa had given me that he'd keep on hurting you as long as you were nearby.

We had to leave, right away, before fear or doubt slowed me down.

4

ESCAPE

You followed me unquestioningly until I turned down a different road, away from our usual route to school.

"School?"

"No, Rukku. We're going to a new place. A nicer place."

"Nicer place?"

"Far from here. You and me."

"Rukku and Viji together?" You offered me your soft, trusting hand.

With our fingers interlinked, I felt braver. I led the way to the main road, where buses to and from the city roared through our village.

In front of the bus stop sign, a woman was already waiting, chewing tobacco as placidly as a cow chewing its cud. A large basket filled with coconuts was beside her.

"Waiting for the bus to the city?" My voice trembled as I

checked to make sure we were in the right place.

"*Aamaam,*" she confirmed. Her eyes roved across my face, which was smarting with pain, and then settled on your cut lip, but she didn't comment.

Soon enough, a bus arrived, raising a cloud of red dust that made you sneeze. The woman balanced the coconut basket on her head and climbed in.

"Come, Rukku."

"No." You dug in your heels.

"Rukku, come!" I stepped into the bus.

"No, no, no," you sang out. "No."

The driver honked to hurry us.

"I'll give you a sweet." I tugged at you. "I'll give you a sweet when we're in the city."

You wriggled free of my grip.

"Get in or get out!" the driver yelled. "I can't wait all morning!"

The bus started to pull away.

I leaped out.

You jumped in.

"Vijiiiiii!" You leaned halfway out of the bus.

Horrified, I raced behind it.

I'd never have caught up to that bus if it hadn't been for the conductor's shrill whistle, calling the driver to a stop.

I climbed in, squishing down my sudden urge to haul you off the bus and run home.

The conductor helped me lead you down the aisle.

"Sweet?" You settled into a seat, and I slid in beside you.

"Not yet." I tried to catch my breath. "Don't have any sweets, Rukku."

The conductor looked at me and then at you, and stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out a hard green sweet that had melted out of shape.

Green was your favorite color. You gave him a lopsided grin.

"Thanks," I said. "You're very kind, sir."

"No need for thanks. Going to the city?"

"Yes, sir."

He handed me our tickets.

My hand was shaking as I opened the drawstring purse at my waist, partly because I was nervous, partly from shock at how high the fare was. The tickets used up most of our money.

You unwrapped the sweet, popped it in your mouth, and stared at the green rice fields that flashed past the window. I wondered if you understood we were leaving forever. I was never sure what the words *yesterday* and *tomorrow* meant to you. Your sense of time was different from mine.

"Marapachi?" You rummaged in your bag, pulled out your wooden doll, and talked to her for a while. Then you stuck her back in your bag and slumped against my shoulder. The motion of the bus soon made your eyelids droop.

While you slept, doubts slithered into my mind. Had I done the right thing? Where would we go, once we reached the city? How would we survive?

5

SHARDS OF GLASS

You jerked awake as the bus thudded to a halt. "We're here," I said, trying to sound cheerful.

The open-air bus terminal was packed with people shouting, laughing, and arguing. The smell of ripe guavas, piled high on a handcart pushed by a vendor, mixed with the smell of diesel smoke from buses. You held Marapachi close to your chest and stroked her wooden head.

As I wondered which way to go, I heard a voice right behind us. "There you girls are."

I whipped around.

It was the bus driver. He'd crept so close behind that I could feel his hot, foul-smelling breath on my neck. "You girls need a job? Money? I'll show you around the city."

I didn't dare answer.

"What's her name?" He jerked a thumb at you.

For once, I was relieved he hadn't asked you directly. You weren't as suspicious of people as I was, and the last thing we needed was to strike up a conversation with him.

I quickened our pace, but he kept up.

"Come with me." His hand came down on my arm and formed a vise.

"Let go!" I struggled. "Let go!"

A few bystanders glanced our way, but no one tried to stop him.

I tried to kick his shin—and missed.

"Don't you dare, you filthy low-caste brat!" He twisted my arm so hard, I gasped.

"No," I heard you cry. "No!"

Your arm swung back, and with all your might, you flung your hard wooden doll at him.

Marapachi hit his forehead with a satisfying thwack. He cursed, his grasp loosening enough for me to wrench free.

We raced away, deeper and deeper into the safety of the crowd.

When I finally felt safe enough to risk a look back, the bus driver was lost to my sight. Still, I decided we'd be better off if we crossed the road outside the terminal, putting as much distance between us as possible.

We waited for a break in traffic. And waited.

I'd never seen such an endless flood of vehicles and pedestrians.

Other people were darting in and out of the traffic, disregarding the deafening horns. Somehow they weren't getting run over. Holding you close, I stepped into the gap between a three-wheeled rickshaw and a motorbike. The motorbike almost ran over my toes.

"No, no, no!" You held my hand in a crushing grip.

"Move!" someone behind us snarled.

I heard the unlikely tinkle of a cow's bell. A great white cow was fording through the river of traffic, vehicles parting to let it through.

"Good cow." You put your hand on the beast's side as though you owned it. It didn't seem to mind.

Protected by the cow's bulk, we managed to reach the other side of the street.

"Good cow." You ran your hands along its neck.

"Yes, it's a good cow, but that bus driver was bad, Rukku. We've got to keep moving."

We came to a slightly less busy side street. On either side were run-down buildings that reminded me of our apartment. Towels, underwear, and faded saris flapped on clotheslines hung across the balconies.

Turning the corner, we found ourselves on an even narrower street, lined with shacks selling food. In one of them, a man stood behind a rickety counter. You watched, fascinated, as he poured steaming tea from one glass tumbler into another, until a layer of froth bubbled across the rim.

"We deserve a treat," I said. "How about sweet, milky tea instead of the sweet I promised you?"

"Tea," you agreed.

I was worried about how little money we had left, so I ordered us just one to share. As it warmed my hands and bubbles of froth tickled my lips, I knew it was worth the price.

I sipped slowly, then held it out to you. "Careful, Rukku. It's hot."

But before you could wrap your fingers around the slippery glass, I accidentally let go. You squealed, "Ai-ai-yo!"

Horrified, I watched the glass shatter on the ground, spattering tea across the hems of our skirts.

"Pretty." You reached down for a sparkly shard of glass.

"Don't touch!" I grabbed your hands. "It's sharp, Rukku! It'll give you an owwa!"

"Owwa," you echoed sulkily.

The teashop owner scowled at us. "Do you know how much that glass cost?" he asked.

Not that much, I was sure, but just before I opened my mouth to apologize, an idea struck me.

"Sir?" I offered. "We'll work to pay for the broken glass."

"Okay. Clean up the mess." The teashop owner stuck his hands on his hips. "Then go to the kitchen and help my wife."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Viji?" You sounded uncertain.

"Everything's fine, Rukku." I gave you a quick hug. "We've found our first job."

6

TEASHOP

The smell of roasting chillis tickled my nose as we ducked through the narrow doorway into the tiny kitchen at the back of the teashop.

A woman in a wrinkled gray sari turned away from the stove and looked at us. Her body was all sharp angles, but there was a softness in her eyes.

"We broke a glass," I explained. "We're working to pay it off."

The woman mopped her sweaty face with the free end of her sari.

"You'll help wash up?" she asked instead of ordering.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Call me aunty," she invited, with a quick smile. "Not rich enough to be called ma'am." She motioned at a stack of dirty glasses and plates.

I set our bags down beneath a shelf on which I saw a plastic

image of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, seated on a pink lotus. Though it was clear that the Goddess hadn't yet showered the teashop couple with riches, she was well looked after: a fresh jasmine garland was tucked across the picture, and a lighted incense stick was placed beneath it. Next to the Goddess was a picture of a young girl who had Aunty's eyes—whose photograph was also decorated with a jasmine garland.

I walked to the kitchen sink, but Teashop Aunty said, "No running water this time of day. Use the pail." Below the sink, I saw a green plastic bucket filled with water. There was a bit of coconut husk that I could use to scrape the dishes clean, and a tin of powdered soap.

"Don't use too much," she said. "Or he'll be shouting at us."

I liked that she said *us*, though she didn't even know my name yet.

"And we only have one more bucket of water. No more running water until four A.M. tomorrow."

"I thought in the city, people could get water from the tap whenever they wanted," I said.

"The city is the worst place," she said. "But my husband wants to live here, so what can I do?" She jerked her chin at you. "Your sister?"

"Yes. I'm Viji, and this is my sister, Rukku."

"Poor thing." She looked at you with pitying eyes—which I didn't like. But I kept my mouth shut. It could have been worse. She could have called you names and then I'd have started boiling inside like the oil in her frying pan.

"You come from where?"

I rinsed off a glass.

"Ran away?" she asked.

"Yes." There was no point trying to hide it. Our story was clearly written on my swollen face and your cut lip—but I didn't want to tell her the details and risk her feeling even sorrier for us.

Smoke billowed up from the hot oil, and Teashop Aunty turned back to the stove. She rolled some vadai dough into a ball.

Before she could do much more, you came over, pinched off another bit of dough, and rolled it between your palms, just as she was doing.

"She can do that quite well!" Teashop Aunty sounded amazed.

"Rukku's made vadais before." I tried not to let her surprise annoy me. Even the teachers at school—except for Parvathi Teacher—never bothered to find out how much you could do; Amma didn't really know either. "She's good with her hands. And she loves making bead necklaces."

"Rukku likes beads." You flattened the ball into a perfect circle, concentrating, with the tip of your tongue between your lips. "Rukku is a good helper."

"Ah! Very nice!" Teashop Aunty said.

I returned to the dishes as you helped her with the dough.

You started humming tunelessly as you worked. Homesickness pinched my heart for a moment. I thought of the rare weekends when Appa was away and Amma had enough energy to join us so we could cook a meal together.

By the time I was done with the washing, my hands felt raw, but the dishes were clean, and the teashop man grumpily agreed I'd done more than enough.

"You'll be all right?" Teashop Aunty asked, keeping her voice low so that the teashop man wouldn't hear.

"We'll be fine," I said.

Looking relieved, Teashop Aunty pressed two large bananas into your hands and a few vadais, hastily wrapped in a banana leaf, into mine. Then she let us out through the back door, into a lonely alley littered with plastic bags and broken bottles.

7

LOST PUPPY

Dusk was beginning to fall as we wandered out into the narrow street. My courage fell, too, with every step.

Fingering what was left of our money, I wondered how long it would last us. I regretted being too proud to share our story with Teashop Aunty. I should have asked her for help with finding a safe place to stay.

"Find Marapachi," you demanded.

"She's gone," I said. "You threw her at the bad man, remember?"

"Marapachi," you repeated, louder.

"You saved me, Rukku. You were a hero."

"Marapachi!" you yelled.

"We have better things to worry about than your doll," I burst out.

"Amma!" You turned your back to me. "Amma!"

"She's not here either. We just have each other now."

You plopped down, right there on the dusty street.

"Fine. Sit."

"Rukku wants Amma! Rukku wants Marapachi!"

"Shouting's not going to bring them here."

You scowled at me, and I spun on my heel and strode away, hoping you'd follow, but you didn't. I waited at the end of the street for a while, but you seemed quite content to stay where you were.

You won that round.

When I came back for you, you were bending over a skinny puppy with huge dark eyes.

"Get away from that puppy, Rukku. It might bite."

At the sound of my voice, the puppy thumped its tail. You stroked it tenderly, with just one finger.

"Come on. Please?" I said.

You started humming to the puppy. It licked you with its pink tongue.

"I'm really sorry, Rukku."

You made no move to show me you'd heard, though you usually forgave me if I sounded apologetic.

I crouched beside you.

The puppy looked right at me, and his nose crinkled, like he was smiling.

I couldn't help petting him. His coat was smooth. He wiggled and sniffed my hand.

"Rukku's dog."

I sighed. "We don't have enough to eat or a proper place to sleep yet, and you want to adopt this orphan?"

"Kutti," you announced, tapping his head. "Kutti."

"Kutti? That's what we're calling him?"

I knew there was no point trying to get you to leave the puppy behind. And I didn't want to leave Kutti behind either.

Because he'd smiled at me. And because he made you so happy. Your eyes were as shiny as the puppy's wet nose.

"Okay," I said. "But now we need to find a place to sleep."

"Come." You stood and beckoned to the puppy. "Come, Kutti."

Kutti pricked up his ears and stood attentively at your side, like he understood you perfectly.

"I have no idea where to go," I admitted. "You choose."

You broke into the widest grin I'd ever seen and started marching down the street. Realizing with a twinge of guilt that I'd never let you lead before, I followed.

On one street corner, three boys had already settled in for the night, huddled together on a tattered straw mat behind a dumpster. We saw another group of kids still at work, trying to sell newspapers to people who were stopped in their cars at a traffic light.

It felt good to have Kutti trotting close to our heels along the dark streets. He was probably too small to scare away strangers, but surely he'd bark in warning if someone tried to sneak up on us when we went to sleep.

If we ever found a place to sleep.

We walked beneath a huge billboard with a larger-than-life picture of a woman decked in gold jewelry—not just bangles and necklaces and earrings and nose rings, but even golden hair clips.

"Pretty," you said, pausing beneath it. "Pretty?"

GOLD AT SUPER-LOW PRICES AT THANGAM HOUSE, the billboard proclaimed—though the price for the necklace it advertised was a number followed by more zeros than I cared to count. "What comes after the ten thousands, Rukku?"

"Eleven," you said promptly. "Ten, eleven."

"Right." I smiled. "After ten is eleven, and we'll never have tens of thousands of rupees, so who cares what comes next?"

We wandered onto a wider road that led to a river. Two bridges spanned it—one was well lit with traffic rumbling across it; the other was dark and deserted.

We headed to the deserted bridge. Concrete lions stood on either side of what must have once been the grand entrance, and a crumbling concrete wall ran along its sides. The perfect spot to stay overnight, I decided. Probably the most secluded spot we could get in this city.

"Careful," I warned as we picked our way around the holes in the ruined bridge.

"Pretty." You pointed at the river that glittered like crushed glass far below us.

Halfway across the bridge, I saw a makeshift shelter. Someone had made a tent with a tarpaulin. Rocks held one edge of

the tarpaulin in place along the wall of the bridge. The tent sloped down to the ground, where its other edge was held down with an old car tire. A cleverly built home, with one wall, a sloping roof, and two entrances.

"Looks like it was abandoned ages ago," I said. "Want to stay here?"

"Rukku wants to eat." You gobbled the bananas, and Kutti and I finished off the vadais.

Our food was gone before I realized I should have saved something for the next day.

It was beginning to get dark, but I could make out a boy marching up the bridge. He reminded me of a sunflower. Matted hair that looked like it had never met a comb stuck out like petals around a face that seemed much too large for his skinny body. He wore an oversize yellow T-shirt and a raggedy pair of shorts and held a bag and a wooden stick.

"*Vanakkam,*" I greeted him, relieved that he was smaller than us.

"Go away," he said, instead of echoing *vanakkam* in return.

"You're polite, aren't you?" I said.

"If you stay here, my boss will come and . . ." He punched at the air. "Tishoom. Tishoom. He'll show you."

"Tishoom." You imitated him, repeating his nonsense word. "Tishoom. Tishoom."

He smiled at you.

Then he turned to me and said in a tone he seemed to think was impressive, "My boss is coming, with the rest of our gang."

"Your gang?" I peered into the gloom. No one else, as far as I could see.

"Ten—I mean, twenty boys, all ten times taller than me."

"You're a bad liar," I said.

"Owwa!" You pointed at a scab on his knee.

"Don't worry," he said to you, and he sat down cross-legged, pulling his T-shirt over his scraggy knees. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

Kutti sniffed at the boy and licked him.

"My name's Muthu," he said. "What's your dog called?"

"Rukku's dog," you said with pride. You sat right next to Muthu, as though he'd invited us to visit. "Kutti."

He patted Kutti tentatively. Then he glanced behind us. "Look! That's my boss."

8

ON A RUINED BRIDGE

A boy at least a head taller than me, though just as skinny as Muthu, was walking up the bridge. He had a wild mop of red-tinged black hair. A sack was slung across his shoulder, and he held a stick that was much sturdier and longer than Muthu's.

"Who are you?" the tall boy said.

"Who are you?" I said, drawing myself up to full height.

"I told you," Muthu said. "He's the big boss."

"What are you doing on our bridge?" the boy said.

"*Your* bridge? Why didn't you build a better one? Like that?" I pointed at the newer bridge.

Kutti trotted over, sniffed at the tall boy's bare feet, and then wagged his tail.

"Rukku." You gave the tall boy a warm grin and poked yourself in the ribs, then jabbed me. "Viji."

"I'm Arul." He flashed you a smile and then tried to look all stern. "We live here."

"So do we," I said.

"Get out," Arul said, so weakly that I guessed he was just putting on a show of protesting because Muthu was watching.

"We're already outside, in case you haven't noticed." I waved at the starry sky above, the twinkling river below. "And I don't need your permission to sleep here. It's not like you inherited this from your dad."

"Get your own tarp," he said. It was as good as a yes.

"You're going to let them stay, Arul?" Muthu said.

"We're staying." I gave him a smug smile. "No letting."

Arul tickled Kutti behind the ears and then disappeared into his tent. Muthu crawled in after him.

I found a relatively rubble-free patch of ground and spread out our sheet. Not that it made the ground any softer.

"Amma," you said, and looked all around us, as though our mother might pop out of the river and fly up through a hole in the bridge. "Amma?"

I put my arms around you, but you kept crying her name.

Kutti snuggled up to you, and you clutched one of his paws. He didn't seem to mind.

Hugging him close, like you used to hug your doll, you finally lay down on our sheet. "Story?"

Maybe hearing the familiar words would help take your mind off Amma. And my mind off the bumpy ground.

Not wanting the boys to overhear, I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Once upon a time, two sisters ruled a magical land."

"Viji and Rukku," you put in.

"Yes. Us. We used to be princesses, the two of us. We slept on soft pink pillows in a beautiful palace. Every morning, we'd wake to the sound of birds singing and the sight of peacocks dancing. White lotuses shone bright as stars in the lake at the center of our green garden. From this lake, a silver stream slipped out beyond our palace gates into the rest of our kingdom.

"No one in our kingdom was ever thirsty, because everyone could drink from that sparkling stream. And no one in our kingdom was cruel. Grown-ups never fought, and every child had all the dolls and toys they ever wanted."

"Dolls," you echoed. I was afraid you'd ask for Marapachi again, but you didn't start fussing.

"Every morning you made beautiful bead necklaces and I read you stories. We had hundreds and hundreds of books. Every afternoon we rode horses that could gallop so fast, we felt like we were flying."

Usually, I told you more about our horses or the wonderful fruits that grew in the orchard, but that evening I changed the story and added a new part. "One day, an angry demon cast a spell over our kingdom. Plants withered, birds stopped singing, and the stream dried up.

"The demon tried to catch us, but we ran away and found a place—this new place where he can't find us.

"We won't stay here forever. When we're older and stronger,

we'll leave. Together, we'll fight the demon, break his curse, and return to our lost kingdom, where we'll be princesses again. Viji and Rukku," I finished. "Always together."

"Viji and Rukku together?" you asked.

"Always."

"Viji and Rukku," you repeated. "Always together."

We had no roof or walls to keep us safe, and that probably should have worried me more, but you seemed content.

You pointed at the sky. "Look, Viji."

"No roof means we get the best view of the pretty stars, right, Rukku?" I said.

"Pretty," you agreed.

We lay shoulder to shoulder and watched the stars sparkle, while Kutti slept beside us. Your eyes sparkled, too, and the light inside them pierced through my fog of worry.

9

LAUGHTER

A cool breeze rose from the river, waking me and riffling the edges of my skirt. My stomach growled like a starving tiger. At home, the two of us would have been up, making breakfast. We'd been poor, but at least we always had something to eat.

When you woke, I knew you would be hungry, too. Maybe we could go to the teashop and ask if we could work there again.

Kutti woke with a snort. He snuffled at your face until you sat up.

"Amma?" you murmured.

"Just us, remember?"

"Go home now, Viji?"

"We live here now, Rukku. Our own place, like in our story."

"Palace?"

"Kind of. We rule ourselves here, so it's as good as being princesses."

You lifted your head high and surveyed the ruined bridge like a princess. Down by the riverbank, people were bathing. I spotted the boys by the river's edge.

From our bundle, I grabbed a change of clothes and our toiletries, towels, and water bottle. We walked down to the water with Kutti at our heels.

Up close the river was not beautiful. It looked more gray than silver.

We watched Arul dive off a rock, his heels kicking an old cardboard carton that bobbed past. With a joyful yip, Kutti splashed in, then ran back out to greet Muthu, who was still standing on the rock.

Muthu laughed as Kutti shook his coat, sending a shower of droplets into Muthu's face. "Now I don't need to wash," he said. "What a thoughtful dog you are."

"Good dog," you agreed. "Rukku's dog."

"Want to come for a swim?" Muthu grinned at you. "The water's nice and cool."

"No," I said. "Rukku can't swim."

"Let her have some fun!" Arul was wading to the shore. "We won't take her where it's deep."

Muthu cupped some water and let it dribble down your back. You giggled and slid into the river, with all your clothes on.

"Don't worry," Arul said. "We'll see that she's safe."

You splashed one another for a while, ignoring the litter that floated by. Kutti swam around you in circles.

If you hadn't been enjoying yourself so much, I would

probably have dragged you out. Part of me was irritated that you'd gone right ahead to bathe with the boys without me. But then, it was the first time I'd seen you make friends so easily. It was a nice change after years of meeting kids who hadn't been kind or warm to either of us—except for Subbu, whom Arul resembled a little.

"Want some soap?" I asked the boys.

"None for me," Muthu said. "I smell good enough already!" But Arul thanked me, and I waded into the water, and we started washing ourselves and the clothes we were wearing.

When we got out of the water, I gave the boys one of our towels, and Arul accepted it gratefully, though Muthu said he preferred to dry off in the sun.

Behind a bush, you and I peeled off our clothes and changed into the dry skirts and blouses I'd brought. With our fingers, we scrubbed tooth powder on our teeth and rinsed it off with the last of the water left in our plastic bottle.

Back at the bridge, I wrung out our wet clothes and towels, and weighted them down with stones to dry in the sun.

"Hungry," you announced.

"Sorry," I said. "Don't have anything. We'll go find something."

"No banana?"

"No, sorry."

"Papaya?" you suggested.

"No."

"Guava?"

"No. No pomegranate, no jackfruit, no oranges, no sapotes, no sweet limes. No nothing."

"No, no, no," you repeated, faster, louder, and more annoyed each time. "No, no, no!"

"No, no, no," Muthu joined in.

You stopped and stared at him.

"Let's sing together, Rukku," he said. "No-no-nooo!"

Kutti lifted his nose and let out a musical howl. "Wooo."

"Nooo!" You laughed and clapped your hands. "Nooo—nooo—nooo."

I'd seen you laugh before, but never quite like this. This was the first time you'd broken into a laugh halfway through a tantrum. And the first time you laughed without hiding your mouth behind your hands, as if you were scared to be happy.

Now you threw back your head the way Muthu was doing. And as the three of you howled away, like a pack of jackals, hungry and homeless though we were, I felt I'd done the right thing by leaving.

10

UNWELCOME

The city was waking up as we walked toward the teashop. Women were busy with their everyday routines, drawing kolams to decorate the ground before their houses.

At one home, you stood entranced as a woman showed a girl how to let rice flour fall evenly through her fingers to make the patterns with smooth white lines.

The teashop man was pouring frothy glasses of chai when we arrived. You wanted to walk right back to the kitchen, but I stood waiting for the man to notice me. If we showed him what polite, hardworking girls we were, surely he'd let us work for him again. Maybe pay us money this time.

"Go away!" he shouted.

I looked behind us to see whom he was shooing.

"You!" he yelled. "Get that dog away from my shop!"

"It's a good dog . . ." I began, but the man shook his fist at us.

Kutti growled. I picked him up and held his squirming body tight.

"Aunty!" you cried.

Sure enough, Teashop Aunty had opened the kitchen door a crack. She beckoned.

We took the long way around the shop, and I set Kutti down. He settled his head on his forepaws and closed his eyes.

Aunty let us in the back door with a slightly frightened smile. "You said Rukku liked beads?"

My irritation at her asking me instead of you vanished when she thrust a bulging bag into my hands. Inside the bag was a beautiful collection of jewel-toned beads, as well as some neatly knotted bundles of twine.

"Thanks," I breathed. "Look what Aunty gave us, Rukku."

You were as dazzled by the rainbow of color as I was. You settled down on the floor of the shack at once and started making a necklace.

"Viji, if you can watch the stove, maybe I could quickly show your sister some bead tricks?"

"Of course, Aunty."

She sat with you, showing you ways to tie pretty knots and braid strands together. Every now and then, she shot a worried look at the door, but the teashop man didn't bother us.

You were so happy, I felt reluctant to leave, but after a while, my worry took over, and I told you we had to go find a job.

I refilled our water bottle, and Teashop Aunty pressed a plastic bag with bananas and vadais into my hands.

"No, Aunty, you already gave us too much."

"Don't argue with your elders." She insisted on giving me something else—a raincoat. "Belonged to my daughter." Her eyes flickered across the picture of the young girl next to the picture of the Goddess. "Gave away most of her things when she died, but this was new—and—I—just couldn't part with it until now."

"Thanks, Aunty." I tried to squeeze all my gratitude into those two small words.

As we left, Teashop Aunty walked outside with us. "Try your luck there—it's where the rich people live." She pointed at a distant temple tower rising above the forest of buildings.

"Maybe someone will want a maid," she said. "But don't be too trusting. The world's not always a kind place for two poor girls like you."

The back alley wasn't as deserted as it had been the day before. A girl dressed in rags pawed at the hem of my skirt as we walked by.

"Give me something," she whined. "I have to look after my brother. See him?" She gestured at a small boy—stark naked—who was sleeping behind her.

Had they been runaways, too?

"*Kaasu kudunga, akka,*" she wailed. Give me some coins, sister.

"We don't have any money," I said. It was almost true.

"Money." You patted the money pouch at my waist.

I shouldn't have lied. You never did.

"We have no money to spare, Rukku."

Your eyes welled up as you gazed into the girl's tearstained face.

"Okay, okay." I untied the drawstrings, but before I could take a coin from the pouch, the girl's bony fingers clamped tight on it, and she yanked it out of my grasp. "No! That's everything we have!"

The girl scampered out of reach, her bare heels disappearing as she turned a corner, her brother forgotten.

Kutti yipped and darted after her, but I called him back.

Even if I'd felt less tired, I couldn't have chased a girl with such a pitiful voice and such haunting eyes. And besides, our money wouldn't have lasted much longer. We needed a job.

I looked for work in a few of the tiny shops we passed on our way to the temple—roadside shacks selling brightly colored clothes and cheap saris, fruit stalls humming with flies, a fragrant flower shop near the temple where two little girls sat weaving garlands of jasmine.

I saw more people that one day than I'd seen our whole lives. But nobody noticed us.

We were in plain sight.

But we were invisible.

II

ORANGE

Sweat was rolling down our backs, plastering our blouses to our skin when we finally reached the temple. It was in a quiet part of the city, with tree-lined avenues and large houses surrounded by walls. One wall had bits of broken glass set into the concrete on the top, so no one could climb over without shredding their palms.

"Pretty," you said, reaching for the multicolored shards, through which sunlight skipped. "Pretty."

"No, Rukku! Owwa!"

Near the temple we found a house set in the middle of a sprawling garden. I could spot every kind of fruit tree—mango, coconut, banana, jackfruit, and even a short orange tree. The wall was low enough to look over, and it bore a sign with the house's name: LAKSHMI ILLAM.

"Look, Rukku. These people are so rich, they have time to

choose a name for their house!" I said. "They must want even more money, too, because they've named their house after the Goddess of wealth!"

Kutti ran up to the wrought-iron gate, which swung open invitingly.

Our feet crunched on the gravel path leading to the front door. We'd only taken a few steps when an old man picking oranges called out, "Ai! What do you think you're doing?" He looked us up and down, and I wished I'd smoothed our hair and skirts before entering the compound.

"I'm looking for work, sir, and—"

"Beggars?" He waved a fruit at us. "Get lost!"

"We're not begging," I said angrily. "I just told you I'm looking for work. I can do housework and—"

"You think rich people are going to give you jobs if you wander into their compounds with a mangy dog tagging along?" the old man said. "I'm the gardener here. Let me tell you what they'll do. They'll call the police, that's what!"

"Police?"

"Yes!" he said. "So keep out."

A noise came from a shed at the end of the driveway. To my surprise, a car drove out.

"House?" You pointed. "House? For cars?"

"That's called a garage," the gardener said.

The car pulled up to the front door of the mansion, and a woman in a sequin-studded sari stepped out. A girl in a lacy white dress skipped out from behind her.

"Look!" she cried. "What a cute doggie!"

"Get out." The gardener shook his fist at us, like he'd been trying to chase us away.

"Stay away from that dog, Praba," the woman said. "It's a stray."

I took your hand and walked briskly out the gate.

Something whizzed by my head. I ducked, shocked the gardener would go so far as to throw a stone just to keep up his pretense.

The object landed with a thud.

It wasn't a stone. It was an orange.

I looked back, wondering if I should thank him, but the gate clanged shut.

"Might as well eat it. It's not big enough to share with the boys," I mused.

You smiled.

We sat in the shade of a gnarled rain tree. Kutti settled his head on his forepaws and watched us.

I gave you the orange.

"Ahhh," you murmured, cradling it in your hands as if it were the most beautiful thing ever. You ran the tips of your fingers across its waxy peel. You turned it around and around, as if it looked different from every angle.

"Ahhh," you repeated. You raised the orange to your nose, took a long sniff, and then gave it to me.

I took the orange and turned it around, just as you had. It glowed like a small, pale sun.

I felt its weight, its perfect ripeness—not too soft, not too

firm. I breathed in its citrus scent. I started to peel it, noticing things I'd never noticed before: how the leathery peel isn't colored the same all the way through, how the papery sections inside feel like leafy veins, how the pulp is shaped like raindrops.

When, at last, I placed a section in my mouth, I could hear it burst as my teeth met the flesh, squeezing the juice out onto my tongue, tart at first and then sweet. Everything else melted away except for the taste, the smell, the feel of the fruit on my tongue.

I ate the fruit slowly. The way you liked to do things.

Until then, I'd thought it was a sad thing that you were sometimes slower than the rest of us. But that day, I realized that slow can be better than fast. Like magic, you could stretch time out when we needed it, so that a moment felt endless. So the taste of half an orange could last and last.

12

CHOOSING FAMILY

By the end of that long day, I hadn't found a job. Our money was gone, and we weren't any richer, except for the raincoat and bananas and bag of beads that Teashop Aunty had given us.

Still, I felt thankful. Thankful we had at least that much. Most of all, thankful that you were following me without a fuss, with Kutti at your heels.

Smart, independent Kutti, who'd scampered off to eat scraps out of every open, overflowing garbage can we'd seen. We wouldn't have to worry about feeding him.

Arul and Muthu returned as we were trying to tie our raincoat to a steel rod that was poking out of the wall of the bridge to make a roof. Arms outstretched, you ran toward the boys.

The raincoat flapped in the wind and started flying about the bridge.

You squealed with excitement as I zigzagged after the raincoat, dodging the holes in the bridge. Kutti yipped and joined the chase.

"Cloth bird," Muthu yelled as he helped me catch it.

"Nice save." Arul clapped. "But that's not big enough for a roof."

"What do you know?" I huffed. "We don't need you telling us how to build a shelter."

"Too bad, because I got a spare tarp for you. A nice, big one."

"Now you tell me? After I almost twisted my ankle hopping all over the bridge?"

"You could thank me, you know," he said.

"I could," I agreed.

Arul grinned.

I grinned back.

"Well, maybe you'll want to thank me after we have some dinner."

We spread the raincoat on the ground and sat cross-legged in a circle around it. Arul set out their food—four crisp murukkus, wrapped in newspaper. My mouth watered, seeing the beige spirals made of spicy lentil flour.

I added the bananas that remained from the bunch that Teashop Aunty had given us.

Arul pressed his palms together and said a prayer I'd never heard before. It sounded like *our father, O. R. T. Narayan, something something*—all in English, not Tamil like Amma's prayers.

Then we split the food up evenly.

Almost.

Arul insisted he wasn't very hungry. He gave me his fruit to save for you for the next morning.

Ashamed that I was too selfish and hungry to be so noble, I downed my fair share.

After dinner, Arul helped us build our shelter. We tied one edge of the new tarp to the rods poking out of the wall of the bridge, right alongside their tarp. You and Muthu helped us stretch the other end of our tarp from the wall to the ground and weight down the bottom edge with stones to make a sloped roof. We hung our towel between the two sloped tarp roofs, like a wall. I spread out our sheet and bunched up the raincoat for you to have as a pillow.

"Sleep well in your new home," Arul said.

We crawled into our tent. I took out the book Parvathi Teacher had given me and strained my eyes, trying to read in the semidarkness, but I could hardly make out the words. I put the book away and thought of how kind she had been to us.

"When we grow up, I want to be a teacher," I told you. This dream had flitted through my mind before. Voicing it for the first time made my dream feel more solid. But it also made me worry if, by running away, I'd pushed it further out of my reach. "You think I can be a teacher someday? Subbu and Parvathi Teacher moved to cities so their lives could get better, right? Like us?"

"Story," you demanded.

I sighed. I didn't want Arul hearing my story and thinking it was silly, so I started whispering as I'd done the night before.

"Loud!" you commanded. "Palace! Peacock!"

"Okay, okay." I raised my voice a little and saw Muthu's shadow as he crept next to the towel dividing our tents.

When I was done, you demanded, "Again!"

I was about to protest when Muthu's voice floated through the thin barrier between us. "Yes, Akka, please? One more time?"

His words made my throat squeeze up, and it was a few moments before I could speak again.

He'd called me *akka*, older sister. He'd made me family.

13

WORK AND PRAY

That morning, after we'd combed our hair, I offered our comb to the boys. "If you'd like," I said hesitantly, not wanting to offend them, "you can use this . . ."

Muthu snickered. "Next you'll try to make us iron our clothes."

"Thanks." Arul stuck the comb in his tangled hair and yanked. "Months since I did this."

"Months, really?" Muthu said. "Akka would *never* have guessed that just by looking at your hair, boss."

The comb snapped in two.

"Tak!" You imitated the sound of the comb breaking and clapped your hands. "Tak! Tak! Tak!"

"Sorry," Arul said, tugging at the piece left in his hair. It stuck up at a jaunty angle, refusing to come out.

"Why are you sorry, boss?" Muthu pealed with laughter. "You just made two combs out of their one."

"Never mind," I said. "Here, let me help."

I pulled out the stubborn piece of comb, along with a chunk of Arul's hair.

He yelped and rubbed his head, but continued apologizing. "I feel bad. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

"There is something you can do," I said. "You can promise to eat your share of our food every night."

"What do you care how much I eat?" Arul asked.

"I don't care. It's just that if you eat your fair share, then I won't have to feel guilty about doing it either. You made me feel like a greedy pig last night."

Arul grinned.

"It's silly to skip meals," I said. "How are you going to live a nice long life if you don't eat properly?"

"What's the point of living longer?"

"Well, what's the point of dying sooner?"

"I don't mind going off to meet our father who art in heaven as soon as I can."

"Our father who art in heaven? Oh, you said that last night. Your father is dead?"

"Yes. But I wasn't praying to *my* father," he said. "I was praying to God. He's called our father."

"God's our mother, too."

"Only if you're Hindu," he said. "Hindus have a million

names for God, but all are wrong, because Hindus worship the wrong Gods."

"I've never heard anyone say there's a right name or a wrong name—let alone a right God or a wrong God," I said. "Anyway, it doesn't matter to me, because I don't pray."

"You really never pray?" Arul looked horrified. "Even the wrong Gods are better than no God."

"My mother must've prayed a million times for our father to be better to us, but he only got worse. He always hit her, and then one night he beat us, so we ran away." I cast a glance at you, wondering if it would upset you to hear me talking about Appa, but you and Muthu were busy combing Kutti's scanty fur with one of the pieces of comb. "What about you?"

"My family died," Arul said.

"I'm so sorry," I told him.

"Don't worry. Christians go to heaven when they die."

"What do Christians do when they're alive?" I said, sensing he didn't want to dwell on the subject of his family's death. I had a vague idea that being Christian had something to do with worshipping Yesu, a God who wore a crown of thorns.

Arul started explaining all about Yesu, and about doing what a book called the Bible says to do.

Muthu joined us when Arul was telling me that Yesu said that if someone whacks you on one cheek, you should show them the other cheek.

"And if you do the things Yesu says to do," Muthu added,

"you sprout wings when you get to heaven so you can zoom about like an airplane—"

"You're Christian, too?" I asked Muthu.

"I don't know." Muthu scratched his chin.

"You are!" Arul said. "You repeated those words I told you to, remember?"

"Yes, yes," Muthu said. "But those are just words, and you told me to say them, boss, so I said them. But there's lots I don't really understand."

"Like what?" Arul demanded.

"Like that showing the other cheek thing. And like why didn't Yesu fight the bad guys?" Muthu continued. "He had twelve in his gang—"

"Not a gang!" Arul said. "Followers."

"Gangs follow the boss," Muthu argued. "So gangs are followers."

"Yesu had apostles," Arul corrected him. "Teachers who spread his word. Stop talking nonsense, Muthu. You should know better."

"Okay, okay, boss. I'll just turn around and show my other side." Muthu whipped about and wiggled his bottom at us.

Arul looked at the sky and moaned about how he didn't want our souls to burn in hell until the end of eternity. If I hadn't been laughing so hard, I'd have asked Arul how eternity could have an end.

"We're running late." Muthu glanced at an imaginary wristwatch. "Need to get to the office, boss."

"Want to come with us?" Arul asked as he gathered the sacks and sticks they'd been carrying the day we first met.

"Yes, thanks. We really need a job," I said. "Where do you work?"

"We're adventurers," Muthu said. "We climb mountains every day. Right, boss?"

"Right," Arul said. "Although some days we swim across rivers instead."

"What do I need to bring?" I said.

"Don't worry, we'll find you what you need," Arul said.

"Rukku will bring beads." You patted your bead bag.

"Good idea." He grinned at you.

"Good," you agreed.

Kutti trotted along as we followed Arul across the bridge to the side we hadn't explored yet.

It led to a crowded street where cars honked and bicycle bells trilled and motorbikes and auto rickshaws spewed trails of smoke. A van lurched by, with schoolchildren in uniform hanging out the windows.

"One day, we'll go to school again, Rukku," I said. "Just like those kids."

"School!" Muthu guffawed, like I'd been joking. "You actually like school?"

"Not exactly," I admitted, thinking of the kids who teased us and the teachers who ignored us. "Not all the time. But there was one teacher I loved, and she said . . ." I paused, thinking of

all the wonderful things she'd said—about my imagination and how smart I was—and how she'd encouraged us both. I realized the biggest gift she'd given me wasn't the book—it was something else. "She believed in me and Rukku."

"Believed what?" Muthu said.

"She said if we work hard"—I tried adopting Parvathi Teacher's persuasive tone—"we can do anything when we grow up."

"I used to go to school, when I lived in my village." Arul sounded wistful. "I had a great teacher, too."

"Don't sound so sad, boss," Muthu said. "We can do anything we want now, even though we aren't going to school. In fact, we can do anything we feel like *because* we don't have any schoolteacher telling us what to do!"

We turned onto a street full of wooden stalls. At one stall, flies swarmed up from an open gutter onto the skinned carcasses of goats. You held your nose.

"Think that's a bad smell?" Muthu cackled. "Wait till you get where we're going."

I couldn't imagine what could be worse. I remembered reading an article about a man who cleaned sewers—on an oily bit of newspaper in which Appa had wrapped pakoras to surprise us with on one of his good days. Surely we weren't going to clean sewers?

Finally, we stopped in front of a shack that had a peeling sign hanging above the open door—VICTORY WASTE MART.

"Kutti should wait outside," Arul said.

"Sit." You and Kutti and Muthu sat on the steps while I ducked into the shack after Arul.

Towers of junk—paper, plastic, glass, and metal—were stacked everywhere. A man was holding up a pair of rusty scales, weighing some cardboard.

"One sack, please, sir?" Arul asked.

The man's eyes fell on me. They were mean, like a rogue elephant's.

"What's your name, pretty girl?" the man asked.

I pretended I hadn't heard, figuring the less he knew about us, the better.

"Won't tell me your name, but you want my help?"

"Viji," I mumbled.

"New to the city? Where do you live?"

"Not sure," I said.

He motioned toward a pile of crumpled jute sacks lying in a corner. I took one, and Arul picked out a stick.

"Thank you, sir," Arul called over his shoulder.

We stepped out of the cluttered shack into the dazzling sunshine.

Arul shot me a concerned look. "You probably want to wait outside with Rukku and Kutti from now on?"

"Yes," I said, grateful he'd understood that the waste man scared me.

We cut through an empty park and past some teetering apartment buildings that at least offered us shade from the blazing sun. Huge posters as tall as we were, advertising the latest movies,

were plastered on the walls. We followed Arul to a flat, open field, where there was no escape from the sunshine.

"Chee!" You wrinkled your nose.

Not far away was the largest garbage heap I'd ever seen. Mounds and mounds of junk and waste stretched out like a mountain range. The fragrance of wilted jasmine flowers mingled with the smell of goat droppings and every other bad smell imaginable.

"Welcome to the Himalayas of rubbish!" Muthu said with a dramatic flourish.

14

CLIMBING THE HIMALAYAS

You marched a few feet away from us, and away from the dump, and stood with your hands on your hips. Kutti stayed by your side.

"Sorry, Rukku," I said. "We have to stay."

"No, Viji," you said in a reasonable tone. "Go."

"We don't have a choice. Believe me, I don't love it here."

You pinched your nostrils shut.

"It's not the nicest place, but—it's—it's so we can stay together, Rukku."

You cocked your head.

"If I don't work here and earn money, we'll have to run right back to Appa. Understand?"

"Appa hit Viji," you said slowly. "Appa hit Amma."

My throat felt tight. You hadn't said anything about how he'd hit you.

"Viji and Rukku. Together." You came over and patted my cheek. "Rukku will make necklaces," you announced.

I hugged you tight.

"Where's Rukku going to sit?" Muthu said.

My eyes darted from one mound to another, wondering what to do, but you solved the problem yourself.

You found a plastic bucket to sit on under the shade of a thorny acacia tree, about as far from the rubbish range as you could go while staying within sight. You weren't as sheltered from the sun as I'd have liked, but there was nothing we could do about that.

You opened your bag and pulled out a long piece of string and knotted the end with a bead, so the rest wouldn't fall off. You worked quietly, your fingers sifting through the beads, searching for another that matched.

I had to start working, too.

"What do I do?" I hitched up my skirt as high as I could.

"Search." Muthu prodded a broken bottle at the base of a mound. "For treasure. Like this. Glass or metal scraps are best. The waste mart man will even buy cardboard and cloth if they're not too tattered."

Hesitantly, I prodded the mound closest to me. Nestling between a rusty can and a broken bottle was the carcass of a rat.

Nausea rippled through me, but I couldn't give up before I started. I tried to pick up the bottle with my stick, but it slid deeper into the rubbish.

"The waste mart man pays nicely for glass and metal, so we can't let it go." Arul grabbed the bottle with his bare hands and dropped it into my sack. "But this"—he jabbed at an empty juice carton and sent it tumbling farther down into the rubbish—"is worthless."

"Thanks. Sorry."

"Don't worry, you'll be an expert in no time."

I didn't say, *I don't want to become an expert ragpicker. I want to be a teacher.* With an effort, I swallowed my words and the bile that had risen in my throat and stepped farther into the mound.

The rubbish heap seemed to come alive as I walked through it, sucking at my slippers like a hungry beast. My feet sank into the slimy mess, and I lost sight of my toes. Flies swarmed around my ankles.

"Shuffle along, slowly, like you're wading through a river," Arul advised.

He made it sound easy, but it wasn't. I squelched along as best I could, making slow progress. I speared a damp rag and shook it into my sack. But when I spotted a bottle, half filled with sour milk, I had to reach for it with my bare hands.

I wanted to run away screaming. The only thing that kept me going was how peaceful you looked when I glanced back at you, sitting cross-legged, making another bead necklace, with Kutti, alert and attentive, next to you.

Arul must have realized what a slog it was for me, because every now and then, he called out, "Nice work."

We worked for so long with the sun beating down on our skin that my head started to hammer with pain, and it was a mercy when Arul finally said, "Enough. Let's stop."

My spirits sank even deeper when I compared their loot with mine. "I'm useless. I haven't got half as much as either of you."

"Don't worry." Arul peered into my sack. "Lots of good stuff in there. We have more, but it's not worth as much. You'll see."

Other than you, no one had ever shown me such loyalty.

Even half empty, my sack was heavier than anything I'd carried before. But with you humming softly as you put away your beads and our two new friends beaming at me like my sack was filled with precious gems, I shouldered my burden without complaint, my back straight, my steps light.

15

EARNING OUR WAY

On the way to the waste mart, we stopped by a park where there was a small pond. I cupped my hands, gulped down some water, and then refilled our plastic bottle. Amma would never have let us drink water that wasn't boiled—but we didn't have a choice.

I stretched my aching arms and rinsed off my slippers. They were unrecognizably dirty, and so was my skirt, even though I'd hiked it up when I worked.

You and Kutti watched as the boys carefully separated our rubbish into piles: cardboard, metal, plastic, glass.

"Rukku wants to help," you told them.

"No," I said. "You could cut your hand on a rusty tin."

"Rukku wants to help!" you insisted. "Rukku wants to help!"

"If you don't mind," Arul said, "why don't we let her help?"

"You're joking," I said, though he sounded serious.

"Don't you ever let her do what she wants?" he said.

You stalked over to Arul.

"Viji, you've got to stop bossing her—"

"How dare you call me bossy!"

Arul softened his tone but not his words. "You're acting like you own Rukku. Muthu calls me boss, but I don't boss him around all the time."

His words pierced me like needles.

"Viji, I'm sorry. I see you're trying to protect your sister, but I bet she can do more than you think."

"Okay," I finally said. "Let Rukku help. But if she slices her hand in half—"

"You get to slice my hand in half?" Arul grinned.

"I get to slice your hands into little tiny pieces."

"Agreed."

So Arul showed you how to separate and sort the trash. As I watched you stacking pieces of cardboard and humming joyfully, the realization stabbed me that even I expected too little of you.

When you were done, your eyes shone. "Good work," you said to yourself.

He clapped you on the back. "That's right. You're the best helper."

"Best." You glanced at me, fierce with pride.

Even though I liked seeing you feel happy and valued, my stomach gave a tiny lurch as you and Arul smiled at each other. Until now, it had been just the two of us.

I jabbed the earth with my stick, ashamed at the twinge of jealousy. Arul deserved your affection, too. After all, he'd seen something in you that I hadn't bothered to notice. What else had I, who'd known and loved you so long, missed, that he'd discovered after knowing you less than a week?

"That's too much," I said, when Arul handed me half of what we'd earned that day. "I only collected about a quarter of what you two did."

"If I was too ill to collect anything tomorrow, what would you do?" Arul said.

"I'd share everything we had," I said.

"So, whatever money we earn belongs to all of us, equally, right?" Arul said. "That's how it's been with me and Muthu, and that's how we like it."

"Right, boss," Muthu said. "You want to stick with us, you play by our rules."

I felt too trembly to say thanks. A good kind of trembly. Not weak and fearful, like when we were home.

The rupee notes we'd earned were crumpled and dirty. One of them was torn off at the corner. Another had a brown smudge running across Mahatma Gandhi's face. But they looked beautiful to me.

Disgusting though the work had been, we finally had money all our own. Our money. I rubbed the notes between my fingers, as though they were fine silk. If we'd been rich, I'd have held on to them forever, just so I'd remember the feeling of freedom they'd given me.

We haggled with a handcart vendor for two big bunches of bananas, one ready to eat, the other still green, so it would ripen in a day or two. Then we stopped by a shack where brightly colored sweets were packed tight in glass jars, and you chose your favorite color—green.

"What would you two like for dinner?" Arul asked. "Your first earnings, so you get to choose."

"Rukku's probably happy with just fruit and sweets," I said, "but I'd like some biryani."

As we approached a street vendor whose spicy food was making my mouth water, a passerby in a faded sari wrinkled her nose and pulled her sari across her face.

With a shock, I realized that by climbing the Himalayas, we'd probably sunk lower in everyone's eyes than we'd been before.

"As much biryani as we can have," I said, handing over our cash to the vendor. My hand trembled. Did we look too scruffy to be served?

Luckily, the vendor was kind and even tossed a dry roti to Kutti. But as I gratefully took the warm package of food from

him, he did ask us to get going. "Please don't hang around here. You'll drive away customers!"

You and the boys hurried back to the park with Kutti, but my feet dragged. Could we ever recover enough to clean ourselves up and go to school? Or was that dream as impossible as pretending the trash dump was a treasure trove?

"What are you waiting for, Akka? The food's going cold!" Muthu said as he settled down on a bench to eat. "Arul's done praying."

I slowly rolled the spicy yellow mixture of rice and vegetables and meat into little balls with my fingers and licked the sauce off my hands. You happily sucked on your sweet. Kutti scarfed up a bit of food that fell through Muthu's fingers.

Dusk was falling by the time we returned to our bridge, and I was glad. The darkness hid the dirt stains on my clothes from view.

16

THE BLUE HILLS

The next morning, you took off down the far side of the bridge as we prepared for work.

"No, Rukku," I said. "We have to go to the Himalayas, and they're this way."

You crossed your arms over your chest and stood where you were.

"Actually, we don't *have* to do anything," Arul said. "The best part of this life is we can go wherever we want. We can go that way today, Rukku."

You beamed at him.

"In fact, it's best not to climb the Himalayas every day," Arul said. "Even though they're huge, we need to wait until people add some new old stuff."

"Plus, explorers can't go to the same place all the time," Muthu added. "It would get boring."

We walked beyond the wide, tree-lined avenues of the rich neighborhoods near the temple and the house where the gardener threw the orange at us, past smaller houses and shops where loudspeakers blared hit songs, and reached the poorest section of the city I'd yet seen. Shanties built out of every imaginable scrap of waste—roofs of coconut thatch or gunnysacks, walls cobbled together from metal signs, wooden crates, or even cardboard taped over with plastic sheets—lined the narrow streets.

"Look!" Arul cried. "The beach!"

Sure enough, in the distance beyond the shanties, past a long mound of rubbish, we could glimpse the sparkling blue ocean.

"We call this dump the Nilgiris," Muthu said. "The blue hills."

"Nicer than the Himalayas," I said. The reflection of the ocean and the sky gave the rubbish a bluish-gray tint, and the cool sea breeze made me like it better than the Himalayas, although I was sure the trash here was just as nasty.

"Pretty." You stared at the waves before settling down on a wooden crate and starting your beadwork. Kutti lay at your feet and shut his eyes.

A group of boys were already at work on the mound. Muthu and Arul ignored them and picked spots and got busy, but as soon as I reached for a bottle, one of the boys approached me.

"What do you think you're doing here?" He looked about as young as Muthu, but his clothes were even more ragged.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I said. "Enjoying the view?"

"You have to give me a third of whatever you collect here," he said.

"Who made you the tax collector?" I said.

He spat right at me.

"Stop that!" Muthu popped up between us. "Leave my sister alone!"

"Who are you to tell me what to do?" The boy scowled at Muthu and waved his stick in my face.

"Stop it, Sridar!" An older boy, with fuzz on his upper lip, came up behind the one who threatened me. "I won't let you stay with us if you start fights."

Sullen faced, the boy named Sridar stepped away as Arul joined us.

"How are you, Kumar?" Arul said to the fuzzy-lipped boy.

"Look, this *is* our place," Kumar replied. "It's okay for you to come here, but you can't bring along every new kid in the city."

"Enough here for us all to share," Arul said.

"Yes, just look at this wealth spreading from sea to shore!" Muthu waved his stick. "Gray gold, I call it."

"We never acted like we owned the Himalayas," Arul said. "And I showed you where it was."

Kumar scowled but didn't argue anymore, and we all went back to work. After what felt like hours, my legs were coated with yellow and brown slime and my back was slick with sweat. A sense of hopelessness spread in my heart like the stains spreading on my skirt. Stains that would never wash out.

When I looked over at you, you were asleep. Your head was

slumped onto Kutti. I was worried you hadn't had enough to drink.

"We need to take a break," I said.

"Kumar's gang is still working," Muthu said.

"Life isn't a competition." Arul followed my gaze. "We have enough. Let's go."

I was so glad to leave that I didn't bother trying to retrieve my slippers, one of which had been sucked away, the other torn off as I squelched out of the rubbish to where you sat.

After all, the boys walked barefoot, and it didn't bother them.

17

HOW YOU BECAME A BUSINESSWOMAN

"I'll go to the waste man and meet you back at the bridge," Arul said. "You two should go and see the nice part of the beach with Muthu."

"Don't you want me to come and keep an eye on the scales to make sure the waste man doesn't cheat us?" Muthu said.

"I'll be fine," Arul insisted. "The girls are new to the city, and they deserve to see something nice after all the hard work."

So Muthu led us to what he called the "rich" section of the beach, where we could see sand dunes instead of trash hills, and my lungs filled with the welcome scents of salt and spray.

We strolled along the walkway between the road and the beach, past pushcarts piled high with corn and peanuts and hawkers selling multicolored plastic balls and cricket bats, flimsy kites, toys, dolls, pinwheels.

"Balloon?" you said hopefully. "Green balloon?"

"Not enough money," I said.

"Money?" You furrowed your brows thoughtfully. "Money?"

"You take a balloon from someone, you have to give them money," Muthu tried to explain, as I'd tried so many times before. "When we take bananas, we give the vendor our money. People sell their things for money."

"Sell necklaces?" you said. "Money?"

"Yes!" I was thrilled you'd understood. "That's how money works!"

"Sell necklaces." You sounded very pleased with yourself. "Get money. Get balloon."

"What a good idea!" Muthu patted you on the back. "We could sell your necklaces."

"Would anyone buy them?" I asked.

Muthu gestured at a vendor who was dozing in the shade of a pushcart piled high with the ugliest plastic dolls I'd ever seen. "If he's trying to sell those, why can't we try to sell her jewelry?"

So the two of you picked a spot on the walkway and arranged the six necklaces that you'd finished in a neat line.

"Necklaces for sale," Muthu sang out. "Pretty bead necklaces."

Groups of pedestrians bustled past without casting a glance in our direction. I was thinking we should give up when two girls walked by. They carried bags filled with books and looked old enough and well-dressed enough to be in college.

"How much?" one of the girls pointed to a necklace with red beads in which you'd tied your special loops and knots.

"Two hundred rupees," Muthu said.

I nearly fainted.

"One," the girl said.

"Two." Muthu held firm.

"Three," you said.

"Did you just raise the price instead of lowering it?" She smiled at you. "Three?"

"Four," you said.

"My sister means one hundred fifty rupees," I said.

"Three," you sang. "Three, four, five, six."

"I'd better pay before the price soars ever higher." The girl laughed and then fished in her bag for her money.

"I can't believe you're actually spending your money on that," the other girl exclaimed.

"What's a hundred and fifty rupees?" the nice girl said. "These kids are cute, and the necklaces are pretty."

"Pretty." You wrapped one around a finger and twirled it so the beads caught the sunlight.

"That's right." The girl slid her necklace over her head. "Very pretty."

We couldn't have asked for a better model. The girl's golden brown skin set off the beads, making them sparkle even more.

"We'll send some friends your way," she promised.

Sure enough, another college girl came by soon, her pink sari swishing around her heels. "There you are! I'll take one."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Whichever, doesn't matter."

"One hundred and fifty." I handed over a pink one to match her sari.

She gave me two hundred.

I returned the extra fifty.

"Keep it," she said.

"We settled on one hundred and fifty," I said. "We don't need charity."

"You're not offended, are you?" She sounded worried. "I'm sorry."

"Not offended," I said.

In less than an hour, you'd sold all but one necklace and we had earned a small fortune.

"You're a miracle, Rukku!" I said. "Your necklaces are worth their weight in gold!"

"Golden roasted corn," Muthu said dreamily. "Rukku is a miracle, Kutti, do you know that?"

Kutti opened his mouth wider, like he was grinning in agreement.

"Balloon!" you said.

We walked with you to the balloon stand, though I worried about whether buying a balloon was really such a good idea. Amma had bought us a huge balloon once, and we had fun with it until it burst and the loud noise set you off.

But my worry dwindled when I looked at you.

Standing erect, an openmouthed smile spread wide across your face, you picked out a long, bottle-green balloon.

"You give him the money, Rukku. You earned it." I counted out the exact amount and put it into your outstretched palm.

You handed over the money. I'd never seen you stand so tall before.

That was something.

No.

That was everything.

18

RICHES

"Where did you get all this . . ." Arul's eyes darted from your balloon to our clothes to the food we'd piled on the ground in front of our tents—a whole loaf of fresh white bread, chocolate bars, packages of salty plantain chips and crisp murukkus.

We'd felt so rich, we'd even bought Kutti a juicy bone from the mutton stall, and he was gnawing on it contentedly.

You handed Arul the new T-shirt we'd bought him, and then tied your balloon to our tent.

"Look!" Muthu unfurled our straw mats. "These are for us to sleep on!"

"What? How?" Arul leaned against the bridge wall like he was too surprised to stand.

"It's all because of Rukku!" I said.

Bit by bit, we told him how you'd sold your necklaces.

"That's wonderful," Arul said. "Thank you, Rukku."

"Thank you, Rukku. Thank you, Rukku," Muthu chanted.

"Thank you, Rukku," you repeated, swatting at your balloon. "Thank you, Rukku."

You and Muthu played with your balloon while Arul and I placed the straw mats and new pillows inside the tents, making them look almost cozy.

"Fly, balloon?" You pulled it close to your ear as if you could hear it reply, the way I'd seen you talk to your wooden doll. "Okay," you decided, untying the balloon. "Go."

"No!" Muthu made a grab for it, but it floated out of reach.

I was just as surprised as he sounded, but my surprise was mixed with happiness and relief. Ever since we'd left, you'd been behaving so differently from before. You hadn't once lost your temper. You'd made friends. You even looked different, because you'd been holding your back straight all the time.

"Why did you let it go, Rukku?" Muthu said grumpily.

"Balloon wants to fly." You waved as it drifted above the river.

"But—" Muthu began.

"You set it free, Rukku," I cut him short. "Now it can go anywhere it feels like. That was really nice of you."

When we were done eating, I showed Arul the remaining notes and coins that I'd refused to let us spend. "We've still got some money left."

"We could go to a movie tonight," Muthu suggested.

"No," I said. "We're going to save it."

"I saw a movie one time with Rajinikanth acting." Muthu boxed an imaginary opponent. "I can still hear Rajinikanth punching the bad guy. Tishoom."

"Tishoom." You looked up briefly, then continued playing with Kutti. "Tishoom."

"See? Rukku thinks it's a good idea."

"She didn't say that at all. Arul, don't *you* think we should save some money?"

"Where?" Arul sounded genuinely curious. "How?"

"Think they'll let us enter a bank?" Muthu chuckled.

"Why not?" I said.

"Now that we're wearing T-shirts without holes, I'm sure they won't mind." Muthu fingered a hole in his shorts. "Especially if we spray on our perfume and wash our feet."

I glanced down at my skirt. I'd tried so hard to scrub off the stains that I'd torn a hole right through it. Beneath the hem, my toenails peeped out, edged with dirt.

I tried calculating how much money we could make if we switched to the bead business. "Rukku finishes two or three necklaces a day. Let's say we sell each one for just fifty rupees each, and we only manage to sell about ten every week. Even then we'll make around—"

"Ai! Stop it, Akka," Muthu said. "All this planning ahead is making my head hurt."

"Don't you ever think about the future?" I challenged him.

"No," Muthu said. "There's enough to worry about every day without worrying about tomorrow."

"I don't just *worry* about tomorrow," I said. "I also imagine good things. But all sorts of bad stuff could happen, so we should plan in case—"

"That's right," Muthu interrupted. "All sorts of bad things *can* happen, and that's why we should spend the money, Akka."

"You should imagine good things, too." I couldn't—wouldn't—let the boys destroy my hope we'd find a better life, somehow. "I don't know how you live without dreams."

"The only way I can get through each day," Arul said quietly, "is by not thinking of all those tomorrows. All those minutes and days and months and years of sorting through mountains of rubbish. But if it helps you to have a bit of money to hold on to, we'll save some for you to dream on."

Muthu grumbled as I stashed our remaining notes and coins in a pothole on the bridge and covered them with stones, promising myself I'd find some way to make the boys see how important our dreams were.

One day, you'd have a bead shop, I'd be a teacher, and the boys would do work they liked. Because our treasure trove was sure to grow, thanks to you.

19

ABOVE A SILVER RIVER

I was savoring the sound of Muthu's snores rising and falling in concert with yours, after telling you our bedtime tale, when I heard Arul sneaking out of his tent.

I felt too excited to sleep, so I sneaked out to join him.

Arul was sitting by a break in the bridge wall, watching the river. "Looks like silver, doesn't it? You could make up a story about a silver river."

"You could make up stories, too, you know." I sat next to him.

"I'm no good at telling stories. My brother was. But not as good as you."

"What sort of stories did he tell?"

"Stories about Yesu. From the Bible. Once, Yesu had just five loaves of bread and two fishes, and he turned it into enough food to feed a whole crowd."

"Too bad Yesu isn't here now," I said. "That's a useful trick."

"It was a miracle, not a trick." Arul's eyes shone, bright as the moonlit river. "If you'd heard my brother tell that story, you'd believe it. Or if you heard my priest tell it. Our priest was the best. He ran our village school. He taught us everything—math and reading and writing—as well as songs and prayers."

"Sounds like my favorite teacher," I said.

"My whole family loved him. We all loved music, too. My brother and sister and mother sang really well. My dad just sang really loud, loud and happy, though always out of tune." Arul laughed. "But my dad was the best fisherman in our village. He'd bring home ten times as much as the other fishermen. He used to call the ocean Kadalamma. Ocean Mother."

"That's a nice name," I said.

"Yes. Too nice. What actually happened was that the 'ocean mother' took my real mother away. And my sister and my brother and my father. One day, the sea receded so far that fish were hopping on the ground. Everyone else ran in, laughing, to gather up the fish. Only I hung back. I was scared, seeing the ocean act so strangely. And then it rose and came at us like a monstrous cobra, swallowing everything in sight, and I ran."

I could hardly take in what he was telling me, about how everyone he'd loved had disappeared in one terrible moment.

"Don't know why I ran," Arul whispered. "Wouldn't have if I'd known they'd all be taken. But, soon enough, I'll meet them again in heaven."

He spoke with complete conviction. And I realized that by

holding on to his beliefs, he was holding on to his family. He was so sure he'd be reunited with them when he died that he didn't care how long he lived.

But I cared. I cared about him as strongly as if we'd known each other all our lives. I couldn't imagine our future without him and Muthu in it. I searched for the right words to tell him so, but all I finally said was "I hope it'll be years and years before you get to go to your heaven."

"Yes. I guess I'll have to wait a long time." He sighed. "I've always wondered why God left me behind." Then he gave me a crinkly smile. "Maybe he knew I needed to make friends with the three of you."

"Four of us, not three," I corrected. "Don't forget Kutti. He's part of our family, too."

"Four," he agreed. "I was never good at mathematics."

20

ENDLESS MOUNTAINS

"Couldn't we all learn to make necklaces?" I suggested the next morning. "We'd get so much more money."

"But if we stop providing the waste man with stuff every day, he might start paying us less," Muthu argued. "Plus, Kumar's gang could take over."

"The city'll have trash every day, but those girls aren't going to buy necklaces every day," Arul added. "Who knows if we'll find other customers?"

"Also," Muthu said, "most people won't pay as much as those college girls."

"How many necklaces do we even have left, Rukku?" Arul asked.

"One." You fished out the necklace we hadn't yet sold and let it dangle from your fingers. Kutti pounced on a beam of light

the necklace caught and reflected onto the bridge. "One. One. One-two-three."

"Just one? So, we don't even have enough to make a nice display," Muthu said. "Let's go back to the Himalayas. Rukku can do her work while we do ours."

I agreed because I didn't want to offend them by pushing too hard for what I felt was a nicer way to earn a living. After all, there'd be time to figure this out. I could, slowly but surely, convince them. I shouldered my bag and picked up my stick and tried to put on a brave face.

"Ready to climb the Himalayas again?" Muthu asked when we arrived at the dump.

My disgust probably showed, because Arul took one quick look at me and tried to make it into a game. "You can be captain," he said.

"What?"

"We're mountain climbers, remember? You can lead our team." Arul speared a large rag with a misshapen metal pole that lay on the ground. "Here—carry our flag, Captain."

"Okay." I took the flag from Arul and stood straight as a soldier, singing the national anthem. "Jana, gana, mana . . ."

You set your beads down and hummed the tune along with me, and Kutti stuck his nose in the air and yowled.

I was just getting into the spirit of our game when someone

hooted, "Look, Kumar! Those bridge boys are following that new girl!"

It was Sridar, the rude boy who'd wanted to fight. Scowling, I faced him.

"Aha! So she's your leader now?" another one of Sridar's gang mocked me.

"Why not?" Arul asked.

"But . . ." Sridar gaped. "She's a girl!"

"Indira Gandhi was a woman," Arul said. "She led our country, didn't she?"

"These boys don't know that, boss," Muthu said. "They're ignorant."

"Who are you insulting?" Sridar balled his fists.

"You started it." Muthu glared back, arms akimbo.

"Never mind who started it." Arul pushed them apart. "I'm stopping it. We need to get to work. All of us."

"Right," Kumar agreed.

"Let's see who gets more stuff," Sridar challenged as he moved off with the three other boys in his gang. "That'll show who's smarter."

"Tell us where to start, Captain," Arul said.

I marched toward a mound that looked like it had lots of glass and tin. Carefully, I waded up as high as I could. I stuck our flag at the top and saluted it. The boys saluted me, and we went to work.

A nauseating smell rose and smacked me in the face, but I

toiled as fast as I could. I tried to focus on the one thing I could be thankful for—the thick haze of rain clouds that kept the sun from beating down on you and the rest of us.

Finally, our sacks were full. "Enough," I commanded.

We marched back, single file, with me in the lead, to where you were waiting patiently.

"Finish up," Sridar yelled to his gang as we left.

We hurried along to the waste mart man's street. We were busy sorting our loot out front when Sridar sneaked up and snatched a twisted metal plate that we'd found.

"Give it back!" Muthu shouted. "It's ours!"

"Not anymore." Sridar shoved Muthu backward.

"Muthu?" You leaped up as he lost his balance and fell. "Owwa?"

Kutti snarled and nipped Sridar's ankle, making him yelp.

"I'm okay, Rukku." Muthu grinned. "But sounds like Sridar has an owwa."

Arul was pulling Kutti off when Kumar and the other boys in his gang joined Sridar, yelling and adding to the commotion.

The waste mart man lumbered out of his shack and took in the scene. "What's going on?"

I grabbed your hand and looked down at my grime-encrusted feet.

"Who's this?" He towered over us, so close that his shadow fell across you. "Another new girl?"

"Hairy nose," you observed, looking up at him. "Hairy ears."

A nervous giggle escaped me. Some of the boys giggled, too.

"Think that's funny?" He looked at you. "What's your name?"

"Rukku," you answered.

"Rrruuukkku," he exaggerated the slowness of your speech. "Where do you live?"

"Don't answer him, Rukku," I whispered.

"Keeping secrets?" The waste mart man turned to Kumar's gang. "Maybe one of *you* boys can tell me where these girls stay."

"They live on the bridge," Sridar volunteered.

"Shut up!" Kumar hissed. "Sneaks can't stay with us." He stepped away from Sridar, and the other boys in his gang followed.

"*On* a bridge?" The waste mart man scratched his nose. "Which bridge?"

Kumar pressed his lips together.

"I don't like doing business with rude kids who don't reply to me," the waste man growled. "Rude kids get paid less."

No one, not even Sridar, said another word.

"How could anyone live *on* a bridge without getting run over by traffic?" the waste man said, but he didn't press us with any more questions. He even paid us the same pittance he usually did, despite his threats.

Still, the waste man's curiosity left me uneasy.

21

CHASED AWAY

We spent some of our skimpy earnings on thick plastic sheets to keep our home dry, because Arul said the rainy season was approaching.

"It scares me that the waste man's so interested in where we live," I told Arul that evening as we spread plastic on the ground beneath our straw mats and pillows. "You don't think he'll come looking for us, do you?"

"No." Arul sounded confident. "He's a cheat and a bully, but too lazy to come searching for us."

"What are you worrying about now, Akka?" Muthu cackled with laughter. "Scared he's going to steal our gold?"

"You two don't think we should move?" I said.

"What, and give up our palace above the silver river?" Arul said.

"Don't worry, he's scared of me." Muthu flexed his scrawny arms. "See how much muscle I have?"

And with you and Kutti and the boys close at hand—and the waste mart man far away—it felt silly to worry.

Later that night, I was falling asleep to the patter of light rain when a volley of barks interrupted the peace. I peered out of our tent.

Kutti was standing by the entrance with his back arched.

"What's wrong?" came Arul's sleepy voice.

A man cursed, and another man yelled something back. I recognized one of the voices. The waste mart man had found us.

Arul lifted the towel separating our tents. "Quick," he said. "Run."

"Rukku." I shook you awake. "Get up!"

Muthu and I each took one of your hands and pulled you out of the tent. We began to hobble across the rain-slicked bridge.

"Rrruuukkku," I heard the waste mart man drawl as he and the other man stumbled toward us, "I've found you."

"Our money!" Muthu gasped. "I've got to go back for it."

"We can get it later!" Arul shoved Muthu forward. "Keep going!"

We stumbled on, but Arul stopped to fling a chunk of concrete at the men. Snarling, Kutti hurled himself in their direction. I heard a yowl of pain. Kutti or one of the men?

When we reached the road, Kutti and Arul raced up to join us.

"You two hide," Arul whispered. "We'll lead them away."

In the dim glow of a streetlamp, I saw Muthu's and Arul's bare heels thumping along the dark road ahead. Then the boys slowed down, running in full view, hoping to lure the men after them.

The two of us turned in to a side street, and we stiffened against a wall in the shadows. I tried not to think of anything except the feel of your hand, bony but strong, in mine.

We were lucky. The men hurtled down the other road, after the boys.

You slouched over Kutti and mewed like a lost kitten. An occasional car whooshed by.

At last, Arul and Muthu arrived, panting.

"Come on," Arul said. "We've got to find a better hiding place."

You wouldn't budge, though the boys whispered encouragements.

"Rukku," I urged. "Please. We have to go just a little bit farther."

Slowly, you straightened up, like a snail coming out of its shell, and let us haul you along.

We sped down a quiet stretch of road where huge trees loomed over us.

"Here." Arul stopped by a long wall. "Come on."

Arul climbed atop the wall and leaned down.

"Rukku first." I struggled to lift you as high as I could, and Arul pulled you over the wall. I heard you land with a faint thump.

Kutti's sharp eyes had discovered a hole, and he was scuffling through it.

Muthu clambered over the wall with Arul's help, and then it was my turn.

The wet wall gleamed in the faint moonlight. I slipped a few times but finally scaled it and plummeted into bushy undergrowth on the other side.

It was when Arul thudded down next to me that I noticed we were in a graveyard.

22

THE GRAVEYARD

I looked around the graveyard but couldn't find you. "Where's Rukku?"

"She couldn't have gone far." Arul glanced nervously into the shadows. "Kutti's disappeared, too—he must be with her."

"We have to find them." My voice came out all panicky. I had a vision of a ghost swallowing you whole. "Let's split up and search."

Something rustled the branches of a tree.

"I am not scared," Muthu announced in a thin voice. "I am not scared . . ."

We walked a few feet farther into the graveyard, and suddenly you popped out right in front of us, from where you must have curled up—on top of a grave.

Muthu squealed.

"Quiet, you fool," Arul said. "It's just Rukku!"

"I know," Muthu claimed, though his voice was all shaky. "I was just pretending to be scared. For fun."

You curled up in a tight ball again, and I threw my arms around you.

Kutti sat nearby, his ears pricked up.

"You should be scared of those living men on the bridge, Muthu," Arul said. "Not scared of these dead ones."

He was right. The living posed a greater threat. Yet my skin still felt clammy, and my throat dry.

"Can't believe you wanted to run back just to get our money," Arul scolded Muthu. "You might have ended up in a graveyard."

"I did end up in a graveyard," Muthu retorted.

"Dead in a graveyard," Arul said.

"Those men couldn't squish an ant dead," Muthu said. "They were too muddled to aim their blows properly."

You whimpered, and I stroked your back. For days, you'd been so much surer of yourself. Now your fists were clenched tight, like they used to be when Appa was angry.

You were silent for what felt like forever. Then you whispered, "Go back? Bridge?"

"We have to stay here now. We had to run away from those men, like we ran away from Appa."

"Amma," you whispered.

"I miss her, too. But we're together."

Squeezing my hand tight, you buried your face in Kutti's fur.

"It's good we moved," Arul said. "See what flat beds we have here, Rukku? Nice and cool."

"Beds?" You patted your grave, tentatively, like you were considering his words. "Nice? Cool?"

"That's right." I forced myself to sound as bright as possible.

"High-class hotel we're staying in," Muthu piped up. "But despite the super beds, I'll climb that big banyan tree over there and sleep somewhere up in the branches."

"Oh, up where the ghosts live?" Arul said. "I've heard ghosts usually hide in banyan tree branches."

"Or right here on the grass." Muthu stretched himself out.

"The grass is wet," I said. "You'll catch cold."

"Pick out your very own grave, Muthu." Arul spread his hands expansively. "So many to choose from."

The drizzle had stopped, and the moon was peeping out from behind the clouds.

"Come, Rukku," Arul continued, "let's show Muthu what to do." He took you by the hand and led you around, making a big show of touching each grave, like he was testing them for smoothness.

Muthu stopped at the grave closest to the one Arul chose.

Arul peered through the darkness until he could make out the inscription on the grave marker. "So, Muthu is going to sleep above Mr. Vincent's remains. Thank you, Mr. Vincent. Now, your turn, Rukku. Which one do you want?"

You chose another one close by and lay back. I sat beside you and smoothed your brow.

You shivered for a long time, whether from fear or being wet by the cool drizzle, I wasn't sure. When you finally grew still, I thought you'd fallen asleep. But then you said, "Story?"

"Story," Muthu agreed.

"Story," Arul echoed.

"Once upon a time," I said, "two sisters and two brothers lived in a magical land."

"About time you added us," Muthu said. I could hear a smile in his voice.