23

WEDDING BREAKFAST

When I finally woke, I couldn't tell what the hour was, because the sky was overcast. The drone of bloodthirsty mosquitoes had woken me several times during the night, and my arms itched with bites. Trying not to scratch at them, I got up and stretched.

"Wake up, sleepyheads!" Arul called to me and Muthu.

You and Arul were already exploring the far corner of the graveyard, where the grass looked as unkempt as the boys' hair. Not that ours was in a much better state.

"What a good place to hide," I said. The inscriptions had worn off many of the grave markers, and most looked like they hadn't been tended in years. The high wall teetered in some places, but mostly it hid us from view of the road. "Lonelier and more neglected than our bridge."

"What are we going to do for breakfast?" Muthu yawned. "I'm hungry."

"Hungry," you agreed.

"You'll be delighted to hear," Arul announced, "we've been invited to a wedding breakfast."

"Wedding?" I said.

"Yes. I forgot all about that wedding, boss." Muthu winked at Arul, and then he wound an imaginary turban on his head. "Is my turban on straight?"

"Yes, but it's not as fancy as mine," Arul said.

"Dum, dum, dum." Muthu started marching, beating on an imaginary drum. "You want to join the wedding procession, Rukku?"

I didn't ask the boys what they were up to, because I was thrilled to see you return his smile, like your confidence and courage were resurging.

"Dum, dum, dum." You walked alongside Muthu. "Dum, dum, dum."

Arul followed, playing an imaginary pipe.

We'd lost our home, but you three were still cheerful, and I tried to forget my worries and be content with that.

"It's as large as my fairy-tale palace!" I gazed at the wedding hall from a nearby hill, where we'd stopped to rest. "Just the sight of it's worth that long walk!"

We could see over a low white wall and right into the pillared room where a newlywed couple sat cross-legged opposite the priests. The bride wore so many jewels, she looked

like one of the trees strung with strands of twinkling lights in the surrounding garden.

"Rich people," Muthu said. "They've stuck lights on the trees even though it's daytime."

The music in the hall rose to a crescendo, the beat of drums and the whine of the nadhaswaram so loud, we could catch the sound.

"Why do they play that silly pipe when people get married?" Muthu said. "It sounds like a frog with a sore throat."

"Pretty." You hummed, slightly off-key. "Pretty."

"Right." Arul smiled at you. "Stay quiet, Muthu, you uncultured brat. Rukku and I are enjoying the concert."

The crowd of guests stood and showered the couple with rose petals. "Perfect timing," Arul said. "They'll move to the dining room next. It's around the back. Come on."

As guests lined up to congratulate the couple, we walked downhill and around the hall to the back, where the open windows allowed us a glimpse of long tables on which banana leaf plates had been laid out. Servers came in bearing huge pots of steaming food.

"Ah, what a spread!" Muthu sounded entranced.

I was more impressed by how much the guests didn't eat, as the servers cleared away banana leaves still piled high with food.

"Here comes *our* feast," Muthu said as a man came and stuffed some bags into the dumpster outside the back gate of the wedding hall.

When he was gone, Muthu skipped over to the dumpster and shooed away a couple of bedraggled crows that were hovering above it. He lifted out an untouched, unpeeled banana and waved it triumphantly in the air. Then another. And another.

He handed them all to you.

Arul joined him, and the boys discovered even more: golden laddu balls, some half eaten, some barely touched. I couldn't imagine throwing away a sweet—just wasting the whole thing. Actually I couldn't even imagine wasting one bite of such a mouthwatering delicacy.

Ignoring the dirt caking my fingernails, trying to forget that these were a stranger's leftovers, I stuck a sweet in my mouth.

"So good," Arul mumbled with his mouth full. "Try some, Rukku." We were all so hungry that Arul had forgotten about praying.

"Yech," you said.

"Laddus aren't your favorite? Want to try a different sweet?" Muthu picked off the bits of rice and vegetables that were stuck to a ball of syrupy gulab jamun and handed it to you. "You'll like this. Smells of rose petals."

"Sweet?" You sniffed suspiciously at the dark, sticky ball and then nibbled at it as daintily as a princess, while the rest of us hungrily cleaned off one leaf plate after another.

"Look, Rukku." Muthu motioned at the cloud of flies that hovered around us. "Our meals are so delicious that uninvited guests always visit."

A skinny cow ambled over. Kutti barked at it.

"Shhup!" you said to Kutti, placing a finger across your lips.

"As I was saying," Muthu said. "Uninvited guests—coming in all sizes!"

The cow edged away, but you rolled up one of the empty banana leaves and held it out to the cow.

It started chewing placidly. You leaned against the cow's side and crooned to it.

24

BELIEVING AND IMAGINING

"That was some feast." Muthu wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Now I feel ready for anything."

"Good," Arul said. "We should go and see what's left—if anything—of our stuff."

"Captain Rukku"—Muthu saluted you—"let's march to the bridge and see what we can salvage."

You and Kutti led the way, and we arrived at our bridge to find it looking like a battlefield, with our belongings scattered everywhere.

A few brightly colored shreds of cloth fluttered gaily where our tent had been. Caught on a piece of iron that stuck out of the concrete wall, a ragged T-shirt hung, limp as a flag of surrender.

"Can't believe they ripped up everything they got their ugly hands on," I said.

"That T-shirt was ripped up anyway." Muthu shrugged. "No big loss there. And they didn't tear up everything. Look! Our tarps are here."

But you were not consoled. Tears welled in your eyes. "No! No! No!"

Kutti rubbed himself against your legs, and you crouched down and hugged him. I slumped by the bridge wall, right next to you.

"All gone." You stroked a frayed knot of the rope that had once held our roof together.

"That's not true." Muthu bent to pick up a tiny bead that glittered near his foot. "See this? Maybe we can find some more."

You took the bead from him, and your face brightened slowly, like the sun peeking out from behind rain clouds. The two of you started collecting what remained of your beads, while I searched for the hollow in which I'd hidden our money. And it was there!

"Here's the money we saved," I announced.

"And here's your book!" Arul brought it over to me and showed me how the previous night's drizzle had left some pages stuck together.

Damp though it was, I pressed it against my chest. It comforted me even more than the money. Parvathi Teacher's gift felt like a piece of my dream that I could hold on to, a sign that though we'd lost so much, we'd find a way to go on.

You came over to me, rolling a bead between your fingers, and we linked arms.

"We can make a nice new home." Muthu patted the tarps.

"Maybe right here? That old tent was flimsy, and now we've got a chance to make a better one."

"No," I said. "What if the men come back?"

"Yes. The graveyard is safer," Arul said. "No one will look for us there."

"But it'll never be home!" Muthu said.

"This wasn't either," Arul said.

"Of course it was!" Muthu said. "So what if it didn't have a fine roof or walls? It's the best place I ever lived in. Except for Rukku and Akka's palace."

"That palace is imaginary!" Arul said. "You've never lived there, none of us has."

"Our palace *is* a home, inside my head," Muthu insisted. "And those men can't wreck it. Ever."

"Yes," I said. "We will always have our palace." I went over to him and put an arm around his shoulders. "And I promise we'll fix up a home at the graveyard, too."

With my toes, I scuffed at the crumbling concrete wall of the bridge. I thought of the money we'd spent trying to make our tent cozy. Ruined though the bridge was, there was something magical about living above the shining river. Even on that bleak day, it felt more like home than the dingy apartment where we'd stayed with our parents.

"I hate leaving, too, Muthu," I said. "But we have no choice. And we have to find work soon. Our money won't last long. Rukku has hardly any beads left, and we can't risk returning to the Himalayas. It's too close to the waste mart man's place."

"We don't have to go to the Himalayas," Arul said. "Haven't you noticed there are junk heaps everywhere? Plenty of other places we can work. And other waste mart men."

"That's right, Akka. Don't worry." Muthu inhaled noisily. "This is one big sweet-smelling city. We know every neighborhood by the scent of its garbage. You'll be an expert, too, really soon."

"Wonderful," I muttered. "My life's aim was to map the city's dumps."

"We'll be all right," Arul said. "We can buy more beads, and you can try to make a go of Rukku's necklace business, like you'd wanted. After all, it's thanks to you and her that we've still got any money left."

"Yes!" I said, glad that Arul had finally agreed we needed to do more with your bead business.

"While the two of us work at the dump, you two can get more beads," Arul said. "But first, let's drop our stuff off at the graveyard."

As we walked away, you and Muthu started playing a game, tossing a bit of concrete into the air like a ball and trying to catch it again before it fell. Kutti was following along, his nose moving up and down. I watched, glad you were staying so strong, although our lives kept going up and down, like the broken concrete bit you were tossing and catching.

25

CANDLES IN THE DARK

Arul didn't lead us straight back to the graveyard. He took us down a street we hadn't seen before.

"There's a church right by here," Arul said. "Let's go there and buy a candle to give thanks to God."

"Thanks?" Muthu stared at him. "For what?"

I couldn't believe my ears either. "You're thanking God the waste man took away everything we had?"

"The waste man didn't take away everything we had," Arul said. He threaded my free hand through one of his and reached out for you with his other hand.

"See?" Arul said. And I saw.

We stood in a circle, linked together like an unbreakable necklace.

"No dogs allowed," Arul said when we arrived at the church. "Can you get him to stay here and wait for us, Rukku?"

"Wait." You patted his head. "Wait."

"We'll be right back, Kutti," I said. "Look after our stuff."

"Because surely our stuff is so precious, anyone who sees it would want to steal it," Muthu joked as we laid down the bundle of things we'd salvaged from the bridge.

As Arul shut the church door behind us, Kutti whined softly, but you didn't seem to hear him. You and I had only seen churches from the outside. Inside, the church was dark and quiet. Faint streams of light danced in through rainbow-colored windows. Straight ahead, instead of a stone image of a God or Goddess, hung a wooden cross with a carved figure of Yesu, bleeding, with thorns wound around his head.

"Owwa!" you whispered. "Owwa!"

"It's just a statue, Rukku," I whispered back. "It's not alive."

"It's God," Arul said in a reverent tone. Then he led us to a place where rows of candles were flickering. He dropped a coin into a box and lit a candle.

"We thank Yesu and Mary Amma," he explained, "by lighting candles. And we pray they'll keep us safe."

"Isn't it enough if we just pray?" I said. "Must we actually burn our money?"

Muthu chuckled.

Arul placed his candle beside the others. You watched as intently as when you made your bead necklaces.

Then he held a candle out to you.

"Careful, Rukku. That flame can give you an owwa," I said. Even though I knew how good you were with your hands, I couldn't help warning you. After all, you'd never held a burning candle before. Worrying about your safety was a habit I couldn't cure, and I hoped I didn't sound bossy. "Wax drips, and it's hot."

Arul placed his hands over yours, so you were holding the candle together. I watched you set it in place.

"Again?" you said.

Muthu and I flopped down on a smooth wooden bench and watched as Arul let you buy and light one more candle. And then another.

Your hand trembled slightly, but your gaze was steady with concentration, your tongue between your teeth.

"Enough?" I suggested, but you ignored me.

"She's hearing the voice of God," Arul whispered.

"Too bad she can't hear my voice, telling her to stop spending all our money on candles," I whispered to Muthu. "Soon we won't have any money left."

But you were so in awe that I decided not to argue.

You seemed to melt right into that moment, kneeling before the candles, your eyes fixed on the moving flames.

And they were so beautiful, those little flames, dancing in that still, silent church, dancing like they could hear music. Like they were alive. Alive the way you were alive, alive right there, right then, not worried about what might happen in a few hours or days, not remembering what had happened before.

I heard a sudden snap, the sound breaking my—but not your—reverie. A kind-looking woman who must have been watching us the whole time had snapped open her handbag and started riffling through it. Our eyes met.

"We're not beggars." I assumed she was looking to give us some change.

"It's not money." She held out a small rectangular card. "Can you read?"

"Of course." I snatched the card out of her hands and read it aloud, to prove I wasn't lying. "Dr. Celina Pinto. Director, Safe Home for Working Children." Below that was an address—a number and the name of a street that sounded familiar. A street I remembered in the nicer part of town.

"I'm Celina Aunty," she said. "I run a home for children and help place them in schools or learn a trade."

"School!" My excited shout echoed through the church. At last I'd found a person who could fulfill my dreams.

"We don't need free stuff," Arul grunted. "We work."

"Our children work," she said. "They pay for what I provide by working for me, keeping the place clean, obeying my rules. No smoking, no lying, no stealing."

"Stealing?" A man wearing a long robe entered through a door I hadn't seen, right by the altar. He glanced down at us anxiously. "These strays are trying to steal, Dr. Celina?"

"They're not stealing, Father. They're lighting candles," Celina Aunty started to explain.

But the boys didn't wait to hear any more.

"Come on, Akka." Muthu scampered out of the church. Arul pulled you out, and I followed. You blinked sulkily in the sunshine that had briefly broken through the clouds.

"Now you want to find another church, boss?" Muthu said to Arul. "So we can give thanks this priest didn't accuse us of stealing and send us to a policeman?"

"Priests don't accuse kids who are in God's house," Arul said, but he didn't sound very certain.

"Well, it's a good thing that priest showed up," I said, "or we'd have spent every last coin on candles."

"Did you see the faith on Rukku's face?" Arul said. "Her soul's going to heaven, for sure. With mine."

"Good for your souls," I said. "But can we please use what's left of our money to take care of our stomachs, too?"

26

PRETEND PRINCESSES

Silver pins of rain fell around us as we left the church. I cast an uneasy glance at the sky. The rainy season had started, and though it was only drizzling now, in the days ahead, we'd face many downpours. Some years, the monsoon was terrible, and it poured nonstop.

"Tea?" You scratched at a mosquito bite on your elbow. "Tea!"

"What a good idea, Rukku! Let's visit Teashop Aunty. Maybe she even has some beads left."

I told the boys about Teashop Aunty, and after agreeing to meet back at the graveyard, we parted ways. The boys went to find a new waste mart man, and you and I and Kutti walked toward the teashop.

We went around the back. I knocked hesitantly on the back door, and a smiling Teashop Aunty came to greet us.

"Viji! I wondered how you were getting on! And Rukku! You look so much taller, standing so straight and nice."

"Rukku looks nice," you agreed, holding your chin even higher than before.

"It's good to see you again, Aunty," I said.

"Stay there a moment, and I'll bring you a cup of tea." Although Aunty sounded genuinely pleased to see us again, she didn't invite us into her kitchen. Not that I blamed her, given how scruffy we'd become.

In a few minutes Teashop Aunty returned with two Styrofoam cups filled with steaming, milky tea.

"Now, tell me, Viji," she said as we blew on our tea to cool it. "How are you doing?"

"My friends and I sell trash to make ends meet," I said. "But Rukku makes necklaces—like you taught her to—and sells them. Only, we've run out of beads. May we borrow some more, if you have some?"

"Of course." Teashop Aunty disappeared into her kitchen again, and emerged with a small package of beads—many fewer and not as pretty as the first set she'd given us, but enough to get you going again. "I kept these for you, Rukku, hoping you'd come back."

"Beads!" You pressed the bag so hard, its plastic crinkled. "Beads for Rukku."

"We'll pay you for them by the end of the week," I said.

"Nonsense. It's a gift. Anyway, we'll be gone by the end of the week. I'm glad you visited because I wanted to tell you—we're moving out of the city."

"Moving out?" I echoed. It wasn't like we'd known her that well, but still, she was the only motherly person we'd met in the city. "I'm sorry to hear that, Aunty."

"Don't be sorry. My husband's elder brother wants him to help back in our village, and I'm happy to go."

You sneezed, and at the sound, Teashop Aunty gave us one more gift—a packet of yellow powder.

"Mix some of this in with your milk every day," she advised. "It's a mixture of turmeric and some other medicinal powders. It'll help keep you from falling ill. The monsoon will get worse soon."

"Thanks, Aunty." I didn't bother pointing out that we had no money for milk. We could mix the powder with water instead.

A man's voice called from the front of the shop. Abruptly, Teashop Aunty cut off her chatter. "So nice to see you girls one last time. Good luck."

After we left the teashop, you and I wandered along, looking for a place to make your necklaces. Makeshift stalls stocked with fireworks had sprung up along the sidewalks, and seeing them, I realized the Divali festival was coming up.

Divali was your least favorite festival. You hated the noisy celebrations, with people setting off fireworks at every street corner.

We found a park and settled down on a bench under a large tree, whose thick branches gave us some shelter from the drizzle. I found a large plastic bottle and stuck it in the ground,

to collect rainwater for us to drink. At least I would have one less worry during the rainy season—we could get our drinking water straight from the sky.

Kutti nosed through a small mound of garbage, searching for a scrap to eat, his coat glistening.

"Rukku," I said, "will you teach me to make necklaces?"

You weren't a good teacher—or maybe I wasn't a good student. I tried watching and imitating what you did, but it took me forever just to string a few beads. Unlike you, I was clumsy with my hands. Beads slipped and rolled away at my touch, and I couldn't make the complicated knots and loops that gave your necklaces a finished look. I was scrabbling around, trying to pick up some beads I'd spilled, when I heard a girl's voice behind me.

"Want this?" A girl stood before us—her school uniform visible beneath her transparent raincoat. A khaki school satchel was hanging off her shoulder.

"Want this?" she repeated, waving a package at us. "Take it. Please?"

I looked at the picture of the pretty orange cream cookies on the cover of the package. If I opened my mouth, I was sure I'd drool worse than Kutti.

"My mother said I mustn't give money to beggars," the girl rattled on. "But she said food was okay."

I scowled at the girl. "Did you hear us beg?"

"No . . ." She knit her brows together. "So you're not beggars, but you're poor, for sure."

I couldn't argue with that.

"Giving food to poor children is a good thing." She smiled, confident and pleased with herself again. "So here are some cookies. For you."

You sneezed, wiped your nose on your sleeve, and continued with your beadwork.

"Come on," the girl coaxed. "Take them."

"Find someone else." I gave her my haughtiest look.

"Please? I need to do one good deed every day, Teacher said, and I didn't get to do one yesterday, and I couldn't lie, and my best friend, Meena, did two yesterday, and if I can't do one today, she'll gloat, so please? Please?"

She looked so desperate, waving that cookie package. She was the begging one, not me.

"Fine," I said.

"Thank you! Thank you!" She shoved the cookies into my hands and darted off.

I turned the cookie package around in my hands, feeling like a princess who'd just granted a favor to a pitiful subject.

27

HUNGRY GHOST

After a while, you'd finished two simple necklaces, and I'd finished a half. We managed to sell one of yours, but for a pitiful sum of money. I tried not to be too disappointed—surely our bead sales would pick up again once we had a bigger stock of necklaces to show.

"Let's head back," I said. "It looks like it's letting up a bit."

Pale sunshine poked through a break in the clouds as we walked back to the graveyard. It hardly ever rained all day and all night, even at the peak of the rainy season. But although the rain had been light, we'd stayed out so long that our clothes were wet through.

I hoped the sun would soon dry us. We had no change of clothes.

At the graveyard, Kutti ran to greet the boys, who were waiting for us.

"Any luck?" I asked.

"Not really," Arul said. "We went all the way to a waste mart I'd seen before, but it's gone—they've bulldozed the slums in that part of the city to build a shopping complex."

"Speaking of building, we found this great place to build a new shelter!" Muthu showed me a grave that was wider than the rest, beneath a banyan tree. "And a nice plastic tablecloth!"

Not so nice, I thought. The tablecloth stank like the garbage they'd rescued it from. The only thing that was great was how cheerful Muthu sounded.

The boys suggested we build a tent around the large grave, using it as the floor of our shelter, because it was raised above the soggy ground. You and Muthu dragged some fallen branches over to use as tent poles. We stuck them as deep into the ground as we could. We used one tarp as our roof, tying its four corners to the tops of the tent pole branches with ropes the boys had scrounged up. Once our roof was up, we pulled the other tarp around the poles, securing it as best we could to make three flimsy walls. We hung the tablecloth across the side that was still open, to make a flappy door.

"We found these three bits of tire, to use as pillows," Arul said. "I don't need one. And later we can get new mats."

As you and Muthu arranged the pieces of tire in our shelter, you doubled over with a coughing fit. I quickly mixed the powder Teashop Aunty had given us with the rainwater I'd collected. Arul and I set a good example by drinking some of the bitter liquid.

But Muthu made a huge fuss. "Tastes worse than poison,"

he sputtered, swallowing it only after I promised to reward him with a cookie.

And I couldn't get you to swallow more than a mouthful. You spat out the first sip and then refused to eat or drink anything else. Not even the bananas Arul had brought or our cookies.

"Can't be good for us," Muthu declared, "if it's made Rukku lose her appetite."

We squeezed into our new sleeping quarters. I was almost happy it was so cramped, because I was grateful for the warmth—our damp clothes made me feel chilly. And because, though I knew Arul was right that we had nothing to fear from the dead, a part of me was still scared a ghost might float by.

Ghosts didn't visit, but swarms of mosquitoes did, feasting on us and droning loudly in our ears.

"Nice lullaby," Muthu said. "When we move out of this place, I'll miss our musical entertainment."

"Tomorrow we'll buy some mosquito repellent," Arul promised.

Too tired to swat at the hungry mosquitoes, I dozed off, only to be wakened by the sound of footsteps. Someone was moving around in the graveyard. Had the waste mart man found us? Or was it a ghost?

I held on to Kutti so he wouldn't give away our hiding place. His hair was on end, and he stood alert.

"There's nothing here." It was a rasping voice I didn't

recognize. A boy. Definitely not the waste mart man. "This place is nice and peaceful and deserted. Now let's go back."

"I'm telling you, this place is haunted," came another boy's voice. "I saw a ghost moving near that banyan tree yesterday evening, when I was cycling by."

Arul sat up. He'd heard the approaching voices, too.

A twig snapped so loudly, it roused you and Muthu.

"Hungry," you moaned. "Hungry."

"Shhh," I whispered. "Shhh, please, Rukku."

"Did you hear that?" a voice said.

I stiffened.

"Didn't hear anything." The other boy was trying to sound nonchalant, but his voice trembled.

"Hungry!" you wailed again. "Hungryyy!"

"Ghost?" the second voice yelped. "Ghost!"

"Hungryyyyyy!" you shrieked. "Hungryyyyy!"

We heard the boys thrashing through the undergrowth, twigs snapping as they rushed away from us through the darkness.

Muthu's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

I heard the boys call out for God's protection and dash away, raising a racket as they stumbled through the dark graveyard.

Muthu couldn't control his laughter anymore. It burst out of him, but he did his best to sound like a demonic villain. Arul and I gave in to our laughter, too.

When we finally stopped roaring, tears were running down my cheeks. By then, you'd tired yourself out.

"Sorry." I hiccupped, finally finding the bananas you'd refused to eat that evening and handing you one. "Those boys were just too funny."

"Great work, Rukku." Arul patted you on the back. "You just made this graveyard even safer than it was before."

"What were they up to?" I said. "Daring each other to explore a 'haunted' graveyard?"

"Rich boys, for sure," Arul said. "You have to be rich to waste time going on escapades at night instead of catching up on precious sleep."

28

DIVALI DUSK

That morning, the three of us brushed our teeth using neem twigs, like Amma said people had done in the old days. The twigs were bitter, so you refused to use them. Plus you were busy sneezing.

"Divali is today and tomorrow," Arul said, "so shops won't be open. No point trying to search for a new waste mart man, but we should still try to collect as much as we can so we'll have a lot to sell by the day after tomorrow."

"Soon," Muthu said confidently, "we'll have tons of stuff, and we'll find a nice new waste mart man who'll give us a lot of money, and we'll buy five packages of those orange cream biscuits—"

"Orange Uncle," you said.

"An uncle who is an orange?" Muthu said. "Can we nibble on him? It'll make a nice change from bananas."

I explained about the gardener who'd thrown an orange at us.

"Let's try our luck there," I suggested. "At least if he chases us away again, we might get another orange."

"Any policemen there?" Muthu wanted to know. "Or watchmen?"

"No, but it was a rich neighborhood, so maybe they'll pay more for Rukku's necklaces."

"Or maybe they got rich by being stingier, so they'll pay less," Muthu said.

The gardener was weeding a flower bed. He glanced up, as though he could feel my eyes on him.

"I see you're back." He wiped his sweaty brow. "And you've found work." Apparently, one look at Arul's sack, not to mention our filthy clothes, showed him we were in the ragpicking business, because he said, "Wait. I'll get you some bottles."

He disappeared around the back of the house and reappeared, carrying a few glass bottles. He was dropping them into Arul's sack when the rich girl bounded out of the house and flounced over to us in her frilly dress.

"Praba, you'll get wet!" Her mother followed her out, unfurling an umbrella.

"Your clothes are so dirty!" Admiration and shock mixed together in Praba's voice. "My mummy would never let me get so dirty."

Kutti jumped up and licked her hands.

"Mummy, he's such a friendly doggie," Praba said. "Please, can I have him?"

"He's ours!" I told her.

"Please, Mummy," the girl wheedled, like she hadn't heard me. Did she think poor, low-caste kids like us didn't count?

"Rich kids," Arul muttered. "Think they can get anything they want."

Kutti shook raindrops off his coat, splattering the mother's sari. She didn't seem to mind. She stooped down to pet him, although she murmured, "We probably shouldn't pet stray dogs, but he can't be dangerous if he's with these children . . ."

Kutti seemed to have taken an instant liking to Praba and her mother, who was now looking Kutti over, thoroughly examining his eyes and even his teeth.

"Skinny, but a healthy coat," she said. "Though he'd probably run away, if we did buy him."

"He's not for sale," I said.

"He won't run away, Mummy." The girl stroked Kutti's muzzle. "I'll brush his coat so it shines like silk and—"

"Kutti, come here." I didn't need to make friends with this silly rich girl. Neither did he. "Now."

To my satisfaction, Kutti obeyed at once, waggling his tail.

"I know you said he wasn't for sale, but as Praba's taken a liking to him . . ." The mother gave me a hesitant smile. "Would you consider parting with him for—let's say, two thousand rupees?"

Two thousand rupees? My head spun just trying to think of that number, with three beautiful, fat zeros behind it.

Not that it mattered. "I told you he wasn't for sale."

"Sure?" the mother said.

"Very," I said.

"Probably for the best," the mother said.

"Mummy, you could vaccinate him," Praba wheedled. "Please, may I get him some food?"

The mother glanced at me.

"Okay," I said. I couldn't deprive Kutti of the chance to taste rich people's food.

The girl scampered back to the house, raindrops dotting her hair like silver beads. You had to have a store of warm, dry clothes to not mind getting so wet.

"We just went shopping for new Divali clothes." The mother gazed at you as you wiped your runny nose on your torn sleeve. "May I offer you some old clothes? And sweets?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Muthu exclaimed, before I had a chance to reply.

"We don't need charity." I glared at him.

"Please accept it as payment for your work," the mother said. "Without your help recycling waste, our environment would be much filthier."

Stunned into silence, I stared at her. I'd never thought of our job as helpful, let alone worthy of payment from rich people. For the first time ever, I felt proud of the work we did.

I'd have liked her better if she hadn't added, "If you change your mind about your dog, let us know."

The drizzle let up long enough for us to shelter behind a rain tree at the end of the avenue and change into our new old clothes. You picked out a red and green skirt. Seeing you dressed in that bright outfit made my mood brighten.

Praba's mother had also given us a raincoat, which I made you wear when the rain began again. I was worried to hear you sniffling worse than the day before.

We walked past knots of people getting ready to set off firecrackers. I wanted to get you back to the graveyard quickly, away from all this. When he heard the first explosion, Kutti whined and tucked his tail between his legs.

But instead of plugging your ears with your fingers and shutting your eyes and cringing, as you used to do whenever firecrackers went off, you handed me your bag of beads and picked up Kutti.

You whispered to Kutti and stroked him until he was calmer. You were so focused on his fear, you didn't seem to mind the noise yourself.

29

GOD'S WORMS

Overnight, it poured, and the graveyard became a swamp.

You were coughing in concert with the buzzing hordes of mosquitoes, and we were all slapping and scratching at our skin. Your skin looked the worst—it wasn't just bumpy with bites, it was dotted with red where you'd scratched so hard, you'd bled.

"Rukku's the sweetest of us all," Muthu said. "That's why the mosquitoes like her best."

"Looks like she really needs a rest." Arul shot me a worried look. "You girls want to stay here this morning?"

"Rukku wants to make necklaces." Your voice was hoarse, but you grabbed your bag of beads and hugged it to your chest. "Rukku wants to help."

We decided we'd set up shop nearby, so you wouldn't have to walk far in the rain.

Slimy pink earthworms covered the sidewalk and the road,

and we tried avoiding them as we walked, but you noticed one get squashed beneath a cyclist's tire.

"Owwa!" You pointed at it and rubbed your arm, like you'd been hurt.

"Yes," I said. "But it's just a worm."

You looked at another squashed worm on the sidewalk.

"*Paavum.*" You laid it gently on your outstretched palm.

"Cheee!" Muthu said. "Put that down, Rukku!"

Kutti nosed your elbow, trying to cheer you up.

"*Ai!*" You pointed at the muddy earth surrounding a tree whose trunk had busted right through the sidewalk. "Look, Viji!"

"Yes, those worms are alive, Rukku."

"Not dead," you remarked.

"Yes," I said. "They're better off there in the mud, for sure."

"*Paavum,*" you repeated.

"That worm's dead, Rukku," I tried to explain. Death was one of those things, like money, that I wasn't sure how well you understood. "It's never going to move again. Ever."

You ran a finger along the dead worm's body, then picked it up again and put it on the earth around the tree.

"I think Rukku's hoping they'll come back to life if she puts them on the earth," Arul said. "After all, the dead ones are only on the road or the sidewalk. You're trying to save them, aren't you, Rukku?"

"Rukku's the best helper." You found another dead worm on the pavement and put it on the earth. "Arul wants to help?"

"Can't, Rukku." He bit his lip, and let a lifeless worm dangle between his fingers before he dropped it on the wet earth. "They're dead. Gone. You can't bring them back to life. None of us can."

You pouted, but refused to stop, transporting a third worm from the gray concrete onto the grassy earth.

"Maybe we're God's worms," Muthu said suddenly.

"What?" Arul glared at him.

"I'm not being disrespectful, boss." Muthu stared at the thickening rain. "God must be so high up, we must look like worms to him. So when we're starving, he probably just feels like we feel when we see a worm die—a little sad, but not much. I guess God feels a little bit sad for us, but not enough to send us all food."

"I'd settle for God sending us a little less rain," I said. "Then we could find our own food. Come on, Rukku. We can't stay here all day."

"Leave her be." Arul crouched down with you, patting your hand as you crooned to the dead worms. "We're not sweet enough to mourn the worms. Someone should."

So we stayed.

A bus careered past and sprayed us with a fountain of rust-brown puddle water, drenching us. My blouse was plastered to my skin. Your new skirt was sopping wet below the raincoat that stretched only to your knees.

You were shivering and coughing, but you started

stringing beads while we sang out, "Bead necklaces, pretty bead necklaces!"

For the first time ever, a few beads rolled off your tired fingers. But you didn't stop until every last bead was gone.

Your busy fingers made so many necklaces, Rukku.

I still have one, the only one we didn't sell, and nights when I just can't get to sleep here, I count the beads on it, like it's my own kind of rosary.

30

MUTHU'S TALE

The money we made selling your necklaces was all we had that day—and it was even less than we'd made last time.

"We should get Rukku some medicine," I said. "And I'm not going one more night without mosquito repellent."

"I'd rather eat well and let the mosquitoes eat well, too," Muthu argued. He wanted to spend every last coin we had on food, but Arul supported me.

We ended up spending half our money on repellent and cough syrup. Which meant we went to bed with half-empty bellies again.

Worse, you wouldn't let me rub the repellent on you properly, because you didn't like the sticky feel of ointment on your skin.

But in spite of the cough syrup, you weren't any better the next morning.

"You two stay and rest," Arul said. "Muthu and I will see if we can sell the bottles the gardener gave us."

The boys set off, and I began telling you your favorite story. Kutti lay close to us, the scent of his wet fur comforting me as much as his warmth.

When I got to the end, about us always being together, you stared off into the distance as though you could see a palace floating in the air. The look in your eyes scared me. I didn't want you traveling all alone to our palace.

I turned over and lay on my elbows and read my book to you until you dozed off. I felt so faint with hunger that it was an effort just to reread the pages while I waited for the boys' return.

"Bananas!" Muthu's cry woke you.

We crept out of the shelter.

"We found a new waste mart man, but he's worse than stingy." Arul's forehead was scrunched up in a worried frown. "He drove a really hard bargain. Gave us next to nothing for all that glass. It's a good thing Rukku's favorite food is cheap."

When Muthu saw no response from you to your favorite food, he clapped his hands in mock joy. "Bananas, Rukku! It's so long since we last had any! I've forgotten how good they taste!" He bit one, swallowed it right away without even seeming to chew it, and let out a full-throated belch. "See? Is that a miracle or what? We can burp, though we've eaten next to nothing. Now do you believe in God, Akka?"

I laughed, though I was worried about you not eating.

And even Arul laughed, instead of telling Muthu he was going to hell.

That was a miracle.

That evening your skin was warm to the touch, and I was overcome with guilt. I'd come to the city hoping for a better life. As soon as you were better, I needed to do more than just dream about finding a school where we could both study. The closest we'd come to that was meeting that kind woman at church. I'd thrown away the card she'd given me, but the address had stuck in my brain.

"Maybe we should go see the lady we met in church—Celina Aunty—tomorrow," I said. "We could go to school and—"

"School?" Muthu sputtered. "No way!"

"Why shouldn't we see what she has to offer?"

"That woman is a liar," Muthu cried.

"No she isn't. She told the priest we weren't thieves, remember?"

"Why?" Muthu demanded. "Why should a well-dressed woman care enough to argue with a priest for the sake of kids she doesn't know?"

"Because she's good?"

"Because she's trying to catch us and sell us," Muthu said.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"You're the one being ridiculous," he said. "I went to one of those 'schools' once. It was a prison."

"What?"

Arul put his arm around Muthu. "You don't have to tell."

"I must," Muthu said. "Akka needs to know."

"Know what?" I was scared to ask. Muthu's tone was so serious, so different from usual.

You and Kutti sensed the change in him, too. You touched his cheek with a tired hand. Kutti shifted his position and laid his head on Muthu's lap.

"I was sold to a 'school' once," Muthu said. "A school where they 'taught' us to make handbags. We had to cut and sew all day. They kept us locked in. The man who called himself our owner only let us go to the bathroom at dawn and at night after our work was done. To eat, we only got stale rotis—if we were lucky."

I shivered, but from the coldness of his voice, not the damp, chilly air.

"If we didn't finish as many handbags as he demanded, or didn't do whatever he said we must, he lashed us with his leather belt until we bled."

I took one of Muthu's palms in my own, but he didn't respond to my touch. His mind seemed far away.

"One day," Muthu continued, "police raided the place and took us to an orphanage. But the woman at the orphanage was a rakshasi." He shuddered. "A demon. She beat us, too. Not as bad as the man, but bad enough that I ran away."

"I found him," Arul said, picking up where Muthu had left off, "hiding behind a garbage can. We shared some food, and by the next morning . . ."

"I was helping you," Muthu finished. "You became my boss."

"Not boss," Arul said. "Brother."

"No." Muthu was firm.

"If Viji can be your sister, why can't I—"

"Boss is better," Muthu said. "My stepbrother's the one who sold me."

Arul looked so upset, I knew it was the first time he'd heard that part of Muthu's story.

Listening to the rain plinking against the gravestones, I stared at our tarp roof that was swaying in the strengthening wind. Muthu's tale had horrified me, but I wasn't sure he was right about Celina Aunty.

My back hadn't felt like a snake was crawling up it when I'd met Celina Aunty, like I'd felt with the creepy waste mart man and the nasty bus driver. If anything, she seemed unusually kind.

But could I really trust my feelings? I hadn't been on my own as long as Arul and Muthu—surely they knew this world better than I did.

31

FEVER

All through that starless night, your breath came in wheezy gasps as raindrops wriggled, like silver snakes, through the gaps in our tent.

When I rubbed mosquito repellent on your skin, your eyelids fluttered open, but you were too tired to shove me away.

I would have given anything to see you throw a tantrum or complain.

I mashed a bit of the last blackened, limp banana between my fingers, and you swallowed a few small bites. Then you sipped some water.

Before I could rejoice, thinking you were on the mend, you clutched at your stomach, crawled a few feet away, retched, and threw up.

Muthu stirred awake, and his eyes had a glazed, feverish look. "Look at him," I said to Arul. "Now Muthu's ill, too."

"I'm just too full to move after that fine meal we had last night," Muthu joked, though his voice was softer than usual.

"You three stay here," Arul said. "I'll work alone today."

"One person can't make enough to feed four mouths even on a good day," I said. "I'll go."

I'd never left you with anyone else before, but we had no choice. Muthu was shivering. He definitely needed rest.

"What, Akka?" Muthu said. "You're missing the fresh air around the dumps so much, you want to work today?"

I forced a smile. "When Rukku's better, we'll start up the necklace business again, and then we'll make enough money so we can take a holiday and both of you can just play together for a whole week."

"No, no, Akka." Muthu grinned weakly at me. "If you kept me from working that long, I'd fall ill from shock."

Arul's face was too grimly set to smile.

Arul led me to a lot between two tumbledown houses where people had thrown trash after the holiday. Gullies of water ran down the sides of the enormous garbage pile, into an ocean of water that looked and smelled like raw sewage. Useless burned-out fireworks bobbed in it, but I spotted a precious bottle poking out of the trash mound.

I bunched up my skirt, tied the hem around my waist, and waded through the water toward the bottle.

A while later, Kumar and two of the boys in his gang joined us.

"Where's that brat Sridar so I can stay away from him?" I craned my neck, searching for the rude boy.

"He's gone," Kumar said.

"Gone?" I echoed. "Happy to hear it. Gone where?"

"Dead," Kumar said.

"Dead! I—I thought—"

"Thought he went on holiday?" Kumar gave a bitter laugh. "He got sick from something. Kept vomiting and then . . ."

"I am so sorry." I looked down at the gray sludge into which my feet had sunk. "I am really, really sorry."

"Don't be." Kumar churned the filthy water with his stick. "Kids die every day. You start feeling sorry, you'll drown."

From what I'd seen of him, Sridar was selfish and mean. Still, he didn't deserve to die so young. It shocked me that someone like us could be here one day—and dead the next.

Arul put an arm around Kumar's shoulder. For a long moment, they stood together, still as gravestones, any rivalry forgotten.

Then they moved apart, and we went to work, trying to dredge out at least a few bottles or tins from the sea of sewage.

32

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

Thunder boomed. Purple rain clouds burst over us like rotting grapes.

"You'd better see how Rukku and Muthu are doing," Arul said. "I'll sell what we've found."

Sheets of rain blinded me as I hurried to the graveyard. In spite of how brave you'd been with Kutti during Divali, I was scared I'd find you cowering with fear when I returned.

What I found was even scarier.

Your body was a tight knot. You lips twitched, but no sound escaped them. Your forehead was hot, and your hair was mangled with sweat.

Kutti was pacing about restlessly, as if he understood you weren't well and it upset him as much as it upset me.

"Her fever's worse, I think," Muthu said. His own eyes still had a feverish glaze.

"Rest. I'll look after you both."

Muthu fell into an exhausted sleep.

I dipped our towel in cool rainwater and squeezed it over your eyes, but your forehead stayed burning hot. I dripped water past your lips—every time I could. I lost track of how many desperate hours went by.

The wind picked up. It tore away the plastic tablecloth we'd used as a door and sent it flapping like a bat across the dark graveyard. Kutti and I raced after it. I pinned it down, but only after it was nearly torn in two. Struggling against the wind and lashing rain, I tied the ragged pieces as best I could across the gap, but everything inside was already wet. A rash had broken out on your back, making your skin as rough as sandpaper, and you moaned every now and then.

Muthu slept on, not waking even when Arul staggered into our storm-ravaged shelter without money and with hardly any more food.

"I ran into a nasty gang," he said. "They stole our stuff and shoved me into a gutter. But thankfully they didn't beat me up."

All we had for dinner was what he'd been able to scrounge out of the garbage: a tin of some yellow-green slop, two rotting bananas, and some moldy rotis. But hunger was clawing so fiercely at my stomach that I shut my eyes, scooped up a handful of the swill, and stuck it in my mouth.

"Let's save the fruit for Rukku and Muthu," Arul suggested.

I scraped off the green fuzz growing on a roti. We ate in

silence, broken only by your labored breaths and the rainstorm lashing the banyan's branches.

Our bellies were empty, but I was used to that. Now I also felt empty of hope.

I hardly slept, and when dawn came, I knew I needed to make a plan.

Somehow, I had to find a way to get money. I needed to buy you good food, medicine for your fever, and things to shore up our shelter and make it comfortable.

A thought entered my mind as I stroked Kutti. I pushed it away. But it returned.

I didn't want to. I had no right to. I couldn't do it.

I could.

I had to.

While you three continued to sleep, I led Kutti out of the graveyard. We walked toward the part of town where the rich girl lived.

My feet felt heavy as sacks full of scrap metal. And it wasn't just my feet that dragged. It was like my mind was dragging my heart along, and it and the rest of my body didn't want to come.

When I reached the gate with Goddess Lakshmi's name on it, I knelt on the wet sidewalk and hugged Kutti close. "Kutti, I have to help my sister and Muthu. This is the only way. Do you understand?"

He stared straight into my eyes. His tail didn't wag.

"I'm sorry, Kutti. I'm really, really sorry."

I'm not sure how long I clung to him, rubbing my forehead against his rain-plastered neck and breathing the scent of his wet fur. He nudged me with his warm nose, like he wanted to comfort me, but it only made me hurt worse.

Somehow, I forced myself to clang on the gate.

The gardener opened it. "You again? What do you want?"

"I'm here to sell our dog," I said.

"Can't wake them at the crack of dawn," he grumbled, but I pushed past him, strode down the drive, and rapped hard on the front door.

A maid opened it and would have slammed the door in my face, except that the mother of the girl was close behind.

"Yes?" the mother said.

"Kutti—our dog," I said. "I'm here to sell him. Two thousand rupees, you told me."

"Praba will be thrilled. She really fell in love with him."

I knelt and pressed my face against Kutti's warm neck one last time.

"Go in, Kutti." Gently, I pushed him. "This is your new home."

He cocked his head, like you did when you were listening hard. I knew he was trying to understand.

"You're a smart dog, Kutti. A good dog. We have to give you away, though. For Rukku. Understand?"

He whined. I gave him another gentle shove.

"You'll like this place. Stay here."

The mother rustled off and returned with money and a package. "Here's money and some food. And he'll be happy here, I promise," she said.

My eyes were blinded with tears, and I couldn't thank her.

Without saying another word, I turned around and walked away.

Kutti tried to follow. I heard him yowl, heard his toes clip-clopping on the floor as he struggled to break free before the door slammed behind me.

33

LIES

The pharmacist sold me blister packs of pills to soothe pain, bring down fever, and help you sleep.

"You need to see a doctor if someone in your family's got a fever," he warned. "There's a bad illness going around."

He was trying to be kind, I could tell. I almost asked him if he knew a good doctor or a good hospital.

Then I remembered how Amma had shielded you from doctors and hospitals. I hadn't come so far with you to risk having strangers snatch you away and lock you in an institution forever.

On the way to the graveyard, I stopped to buy two new tarps, one to lay across our tent so we could keep dry again and another for a better door. Praba's mother had given us perfectly good bananas and bags of banana chips, but from a nearby stall, I bought a

doll with bright black hair you could comb. Then, as I hurried back, I dreamed of how I'd spend the rest of our money later, on things that would make our life more comfortable, starting with a foam mattress for you and Muthu, and new books for me to read to everyone.

Arul was looking for me when I returned.

"I was worried sick!" Arul scolded. "What happened?"

"Kutti's gone." I thrust all the remaining money into his hands.

"You—sold . . ." Arul didn't seem to be able to finish the sentence.

At least I didn't have to explain.

"Rukku won't really mind," I tried to convince myself. "She had a doll she used to love, so I got her this, see . . ."

Arul didn't say anything. He didn't frown and didn't smile either.

"Rukku?" I shook you gently. "I have medicine. And fresh bananas." I waved a bright yellow one under your nose.

You were unusually docile, swallowing the medicine without any argument.

"Kutti?" Your eyes searched the tent.

"Kutti's gone," I said.

"Gone?" you echoed.

"Who's gone?" Muthu opened his eyelids slowly and sat up.

"Kutti left." I had thought of saying Kutti was run over by a truck, but what if Muthu asked to bury the body?

"Can't be," Muthu protested. "He's never run off before."

"Maybe he just didn't like living here in the graveyard." The

more I said, the less convincing my lie sounded. "He's gone, I'm telling you. Gone."

"Dogs don't just go away," Muthu said.

"How do you know? You've had dogs before, or what?"

"He loved us." Muthu's confidence was unshakable.

"He's just a dog, not a human being! Even humans leave people they love!"

"Dogs are loyal," Muthu said.

"Maybe Kutti wanted a better life, so he left."

For the first time since you'd fallen ill, you seemed to be following a conversation. I felt triumphant, as if the medicine was already working, although I knew no medicine worked right away.

"Enough about Kutti. I bought medicine for you both. Rukku's had hers. Now you."

"Thanks, Akka," Muthu whispered. "My head hurts. And my joints and my bones and even behind my eyes. I'm hurting all over."

"You'll be better tomorrow," Arul said. "Once the medicine starts working."

I was sure I'd done the right thing until you murmured, "Kutti left."

The quiet acceptance in your tone jolted me, and I wondered if my lie about Kutti not loving us enough to stay had hurt you worse than if I'd pretended he'd died.

It sounded like you'd given up altogether. On him, on me, on everything.

34

THE COURAGE TO TRUST

As the day wore on, I told myself your fever was coming down, that the medicines were allowing you to sleep more deeply, that you'd be better when you woke.

But that night, I couldn't pretend anymore. We couldn't deny you were worse.

Although we had better food than ever, I couldn't get you to eat or drink. I couldn't even get you to open your eyes.

I drew your head onto my lap and stroked your brow. I called your name.

You didn't respond at all.

"It's not true, Rukku," I confessed in my desperation. "I sold Kutti, even though he was more yours than mine. I'm so sorry. I only wanted to save you, Rukku. Get better. Please."

By then, I don't think you could hear me.

"Maybe we should light a candle in church for them?" Arul suggested.

"Or maybe we should ask the woman we met in church for help," I said.

Arul wound your new doll's hair around one of his wrists like a handcuff.

"I don't see any other way, Arul."

"But don't you remember what Muthu said?"

"What would you rather do? Watch them—watch them . . ." I couldn't finish the sentence.

When I think of it now, it seems so clear, so simple that I should have gone straight to Celina Aunty once your fever spiked. But I was so terribly confused, Rukku.

Only a few adults had ever really helped us. And this was more than just seeking help. This was trusting her—a stranger—completely.

"Well, she was in church and did seem kind," Arul said softly, as if to convince himself this was the right thing to do.

"Let's go." I repeated the address that I remembered on the card.

"Not too far." Arul gathered your limp body in his arms. "Can you help Muthu get there?"

Muthu's lids drooped when I woke him. He didn't seem to know or care what was happening, because without argument, he let me slide an arm beneath his shoulders and drag him along, half asleep.

Through needles of rain, we staggered toward the home for

children that Muthu had been so sure was a kind of jail. Frayed yellow threads of dawn were trailing through the sky when we finally reached the gate.

It was locked.

"Help!" I shook it until it jangled loudly, and a woman came out.

Celina Aunty.

35

HOSPITAL

"Can you help my sister?" I asked Celina Aunty. I thrust our money into her hands. "We can pay."

"Of course I'll help." Celina Aunty took the money. "And I'll keep this safe for you."

"I'm not coming," Arul muttered.

"Your choice." Celina Aunty took Rukku's limp body from Arul. "We don't force anyone to live here."

Inside, Celina Aunty laid Rukku down on a sofa and motioned for me to set Muthu down on another. "I have to call a doctor. They need to go to a hospital."

"Promise you won't lock my sister away?" The old fear surged inside me again.

"I'd never do that."

Celina Aunty spoke to a doctor on the phone and waited with me until she came. The doctor took your temperature and

listened to your chest. You didn't shrink from her gentle touch and kind voice.

She examined Muthu next, but I only had eyes for you.

Dr. Sumitra asked me lots of questions: "Did you use mosquito nets?" "Did you boil the water before you drank it?" "What medication did you try to give her?" "How much?" "How long has her brow felt so hot?"

As best I could, I answered those questions.

When I asked the only question that mattered to me—"Will my sister be okay?"—Dr. Sumitra didn't reply.

She left to join Celina Aunty in the next room, where they spoke in hushed tones. I strained my ears but couldn't catch what they were saying.

In that room where you were lying, a cross hung on the wall above the sofa, like the one we'd seen in church. Looking at Yesu on the cross, I said the prayer Arul had taught me. I said every prayer Amma had sung that I could remember. I prayed silently, words echoing in my head louder than anything I'd ever spoken.

Wherever you are, I begged, *whoever you are, please, let Rukku get better.*

It must only have been a few minutes later that men came and carried you and Muthu into an ambulance. Celina Aunty and I got in. You were both in such a stupor that neither the flashing lights nor the sirens seemed to upset you.

The men carried the two of you into a hospital. Silent as a shadow, I followed Celina Aunty while she talked to people and filled out forms, and the men wheeled you both out of sight.

A strangely familiar scent rose from the floor. After all those days of having my nose filled with the scents of rubbish, it took me time to recognize the burning scent of the acrid liquid Amma used to clean our bathroom every once in a while.

Celina Aunty tried to explain. "Dr. Sumitra thinks they may have dengue fever. It's carried by mosquitoes."

"They'll get better, right?"

"I hope so, Viji. Most people do, but . . ." Her eyes got shiny like she was about to cry.

She clutched my hand until a nurse came and led us through the hospital to peek into the overcrowded ward where you were. You and Muthu lay in beds near one another. You were each hooked up to a contraption that dripped medicine and food and water into your veins, Celina Aunty explained.

"They'll be well looked after," she promised.

She didn't promise you'd get better.

I wanted to stay with you, but Celina Aunty insisted the best thing I could do was try to get some sleep and make sure I didn't fall ill, too.

Back at the home, she asked questions about us.

We'd always looked out for each other, I said. I told her how you'd earned money with your beadwork, how well you

could work with your hands, how most of our teachers and even Amma thought you couldn't do much of anything.

At that, she frowned. "Too often, we expect too little," she said.

"Rukku was more careful about what she ate than we were. She never waded through trash like we did," I said. "It's not fair she fell ill."

"Life isn't fair." Celina Aunty sighed. "There are too many children like you without a home. And children shouldn't have to work. I'm just glad I can help you a little now. Thank you for trusting me, Viji."

If only I'd trusted Celina Aunty sooner, you and Muthu might have been playing in the sunshine, celebrating the end of the rainy season, instead of lying on hospital beds.

That night, Celina Aunty asked if I wanted to call anyone on the phone or write anyone a letter.

I wrote to Amma, but I didn't tell Celina Aunty whom I was writing to.

I let Amma know we were in the city with good friends. I asked her if she was all right, said I would earn and send her money.

I didn't tell her how sick you were.

I didn't want to believe it.

36

GONE

I ate and slept, but hardly spoke to the other girls in my room or to the boys who slept in another part of the house.

After breakfast, Celina Aunty drove me from the house where she lived, along with two teachers and all the children, to the hospital.

There, I held your hand and told you our story, although you slept the whole time.

Muthu was delirious, raving in his sleep.

The doctor confirmed you both had dengue fever. Except you had developed pneumonia, too. Muthu hadn't, so his condition was less complicated.

A night or two later, Dr. Sumitra proclaimed that Muthu was "out of danger," and he was sent to another part of the hospital.

When I saw him—scrubbed clean by a nurse, with his hair

cut short and washed and brushed—I could hardly believe it was Muthu. I realized I must have looked more presentable, too, because Celina Aunty had given me clothes, and I'd bathed and combed my hair. But Muthu didn't comment on my appearance.

He just asked, "How's Rukku?"

"Not well enough," I said.

He slipped his fingers through mine. They felt bony as a skeleton's.

"Will you tell me the story, Akka?" he asked. "The fairy tale you used to tell on the bridge?"

I tried a few times but kept choking up, unable to get beyond the first sentences.

"Never mind." Muthu squeezed my hand tight.

That afternoon, a surprise was waiting for me.

Arul.

"I couldn't stand being away," Arul said. "I'd rather be locked in with all of you than alone and free."

His words felt like a warm ray of sunshine slipping in through a rain-soaked sky.

Arul had brought with him the new doll I'd bought you. The one you'd been too sick to play with.

When we visited you that night, I took the doll with us, hoping your eyes would light up when you saw her.

But by the time we stood by your bed, your own body was as stiff as a wooden doll's and it was too late.

Celina Aunty asked many questions. Hadn't I written a letter to someone? Were our parents alive? Shouldn't she try to contact them?

No, I said. Definitely not.

What should she do with your body?

I didn't reply.

Burned or buried, what was the difference? You were gone.

Arul answered for me. He said you were Christian, so we should bury you. And I thought of you lighting candles and didn't say no.

37

STONES

Christmas came about a month after your funeral. The rains had stopped by then.

In the hall of the home, Celina Aunty set up a little crèche, a set of dolls in a stable: baby Yesu, Mary, Joseph, three kings, a drummer boy, and lots of animals. Outside the front door, she hung a paper star with a twinkling light inside. You'd have loved all of this—as well as the strings of lights she wound around the crèche and the branch she stuck in a pot and called a Christmas tree.

She gave all of us presents. The little kids who live at the home laughed and gave me friendly smiles, but it was hard for me to act like I was in good spirits.

Arul and Muthu got fancy kurtas, which they changed into right away. I noticed they had both put on a bit of weight. But though Muthu's body looked less frail than before, his eyes

hadn't regained their twinkle. And he wasn't the chatterbox you knew either. He was unusually quiet around me, like he knew I couldn't stand it if he started making jokes.

"You look smart in your new clothes," I managed to say.

"What did you get, Akka?" Muthu asked.

I didn't care what my gift was, but I opened the package, for his sake.

I got a notebook, handmade paper, and pencils made from recycled scraps.

"What's this for?" Muthu asked.

"To write on," Celina Aunty said.

"I have no one to write to and nothing to say," I told her.

She didn't respond. Not right away. But before we went to bed that night, Celina Aunty called me into the schoolroom and motioned me toward one of the empty desks.

"Sit," she ordered. "Write."

"Write?" I said. "Why?"

"Because you're not talking much to anyone, Viji, and that's not healthy. Your thoughts are sitting inside you like a stone, and I think you should set them down on paper."

I stared at the empty page before me and picked up the pencil, and she corrected my grip, and I stared at the page some more.

The paper seemed to stretch. Its emptiness grew, and mine grew, too. My fingers went limp, and the pencil rolled off onto the floor.

She picked up the pencil and put it in my hands again.

For months, I couldn't write, Rukku. Celina Aunty would sit beside me, reading, keeping me silent company.

Arul and Muthu visited your grave in a nearby cemetery every week and laid flowers on it.

I didn't join them.

But I did all the chores I was supposed to do at the home. In fact, I liked doing chores, not only because it made me feel like I was not living on charity, but also because it gave me a reason to do something when I felt like a rock was sitting on my chest, weighing me down so I couldn't rise out of bed.

38

GOOD IS GOD

During the day, students of all ages sit together in the biggest room in the house, learning. Reading, writing, mathematics, history, geography, science. The teachers give us different things to do, and we work at our own pace.

Arul doesn't join us, because he has no interest in schoolwork. Instead, he takes a bus every morning to work with a carpenter. Celina Aunty says this is an important path, too—getting special skills to become carpenters, tailors, gardeners, or to learn some other trade.

She says she wishes she had more space, so she could take in every homeless kid, but she can't. She doesn't have enough space for all of us to live here forever, so those who are older, like me and especially like Arul, who's even a bit older, are allowed to stay for a bit, until we have a safe, sure place to move to.

Before our lessons each morning, we gather in the hall to

pray. Most of the children here are Christian, like Celina Aunty, but some are Hindu, and two are Muslims.

The prayer assembly is unending. Celina Aunty starts off with Arul's favorite prayer to "our father" and then there are prayers to Mary and Allah, and some Hindu chants that Amma used to say. When I hear those, I miss Amma.

It amazes me that there are so many different words to pray with, and so many people praying, but there is still so much misery and cruelty in the world.

This morning, during the prayer assembly, I yawned and yawned, and Muthu caught my eye and started yawning, too. Soon, I'd set the whole place yawning.

Priya Aunty, one of our other teachers, told me off. "You're the oldest girl here," she said. "If you don't start showing respect, all the little ones are going to behave badly."

"I don't behave badly," I said.

"Don't talk back." Her face flushed redder than a brick. Lips quivering with rage, she hauled me off to Celina Aunty's office and ranted. Celina Aunty listened and didn't let me say a word until after Priya Aunty stormed off into the classroom.

"Viji, I can imagine you feel guilty about your sister's death, but you need to stop accusing yourself. You made the choices that seemed best. You did all you could."

Those weren't the words I'd expected from her.

"Religion can be a solace, Viji. If you have faith in a higher

power, if you trust that each life has a purpose whether we see it or not, if you could only believe your sister has a soul that's still alive—"

"You want to convert me? You can't," I told her. "Ask Arul. He's been trying ever since we met."

"I'm not trying and never will try to convert you, Viji. It's just that when we suffer a loss like you have, we lose a sense of purpose. I lost hope when I lost my husband, and I found it again in God, but it's not the only way. Maybe your way is to search inside yourself and rediscover purpose."

My life felt pointless now that you were gone. She got that right, but I didn't say so.

"You also need to respect Priya Aunty's position," she said quietly. "We can't have children here being disrespectful to any religion."

"I'm not mean about any one religion," I said. "They're all equally silly."

An amused smile flickered across her face. "We can't have you being disrespectful to all religions either."

What about respecting my nonreligion? I thought.

As though I'd spoken those words, Celina Aunty said, "I think I understand you, Viji."

She wrote two words on a piece of paper and turned it toward me so I could read them.

God and *Good*, side by side.

"Those two words, *God* and *Good*, are only one letter apart

in the English language," she said. "So maybe, when we pray in the morning, if you don't want to think of God, you might try thinking about being Good. About doing Good. Yes?"

"Okay," I said.

"I don't mind if you have no faith in religion, Viji. Just as long as you have faith in the goodness within yourself."

39

LOSING AND FINDING

Celina Aunty assigned me and Arul the job of doing the dishes together. For months, we didn't talk much as we worked side by side in the kitchen. But one evening, Arul finally broke the silence.

He asked how I was doing, and when, as usual, I just said, "Fine," he wouldn't let me get away with it.

"No," he said. "You're not fine, Viji."

I said nothing.

"Talk to me," he said. "Let me help."

"I don't need your help," I growled.

Arul sighed. "Sulking and being rude to people who care about you isn't going to make life any easier."

"Since when," I said, "has life been easy?"

"Since now!" Arul let a dish clatter into the sink. "Some

things are easier here than on the bridge—in spite of all that's happened—and you have to stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"I don't just sulk!" I shocked myself by shouting for the first time since your passing. "I do every chore I'm given. I clean. I sit in the classroom. I eat. I sleep."

"You don't look like you've been sleeping much."

"That's because Rukku is gone, Arul! She's gone because of me. If I hadn't forced her to leave home—"

"If she hadn't come here with you, she'd never have enjoyed the good times we had, and we had so many good times, Viji."

"I should never have run away."

"What choice did you have? I've heard of parents who beat their kids to death. Who knows what your father might have done? You tried your best—"

"It's my fault Rukku died."

"Your fault you couldn't see into the future? If you're to blame, we are, too. If I'd believed you when you were scared the waste mart man would come after us, we might never have been forced to live in that mosquito-infested graveyard. If Muthu hadn't scared you off from Celina Aunty, you might have come here sooner."

He couldn't comfort me. I banged the pan against the sink. "I want her back!"

"Stop it." Arul yanked the pan out of my hands. "I miss her, too. So does Muthu."

"She was not your sister! She was mine. Mine. Now I have no one."

"You're no more alone than Muthu and I are," Arul yelled. "If you choose to drown in loneliness, go ahead, but don't claim she wasn't our sister. We're not just friends, we're family."

The loudness of his tone shocked me.

"Start looking at what you haven't lost," Arul said. "Start giving thanks for what you do have."

"Thanks?" An odd snort left my lips. "That's all you ever do. If someone came to stab you, you'd probably thank them, too, wouldn't you? But there's nothing to be thankful about."

"Yes there is," he said, taking my soapy hands in his. "You're here in this home with a chance to do something more with your life. You have Celina Aunty. You have me. You have Muthu. Most of all, you have yourself."

"Myself?"

"Yes. And now that you've been angry and raised your voice again, you'll feel a lot better—just wait and see."

He was right.

When I left the kitchen that night, I found I actually wanted to write to you for the first time.

Easter came, and I finally agreed to visit your grave with Arul and Muthu. On your stone, instead of flowers, I laid down one of the chocolate Easter eggs Celina Aunty had given us.

"She'd have loved that," Muthu said. "Sweet, gooey, and wrapped in green foil, her favorite color."

"I'm sure she'd have loved the flowers you always leave for her, too," I said.

As we left the cemetery where you'd been buried, Arul said Easter was about new beginnings. But some things will never change, Rukku.

You'll never be back.

40

HOPE

"I'm going to visit a place I'd love for you to see," Celina Aunty told me the next day. "So you're excused from attending lessons."

I shrugged like it didn't matter one way or another, but I felt myself flush with pleasure. She'd chosen me to go somewhere with her, as a special treat.

She drove us to a white bungalow, three stories high, an oasis of calm in the midst of all the noise and bustle. Celina Aunty smiled as she parked the car. "This is a school for children like Rukku."

"Children like Rukku?" Anger spurted out of me. "No one's like Rukku!" I yelled. "No one!"

"Viji? I put that very badly." Celina Aunty bit her lip. "There's no one in the world like your sister. I didn't mean those words to sound the way they did. I'm sorry."

I screwed up my eyelids, tight, so no tears would fall out.

"I have a sister, Viji. A sister with a disability."

My eyes flew open.

"We never were as poor as the two of you, but we weren't rich either. She came to this school. It's a school for young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

For a while I said nothing, but her words were a key, opening my locked heart. "Where's your sister now, Celina Aunty?"

"She works at a print shop. She used to have her own little place at the other end of the city, but recently she got married and moved farther away. We meet as often as we can."

"Will you take me to see your sister sometime?"

"Sure. Now, are you ready to go in, Viji?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry for yelling."

Everyone in the building greeted us with smiles and vanakkams. Everyone seemed to know—and like—Celina Aunty.

We were shown into an office. Sitting behind a desk, beneath a picture of the Hindu God Ganesha, was a wiry young woman. She sprang up and pressed her palms together in greeting.

"Viji, this is the director," Celina Aunty said. "Dr. Dhanam."

"Call me Dhanam Aunty, Viji. Come. Let me show you around."

We followed Dhanam Aunty into a sunny, high-ceilinged room. We stayed by the door, peeking in.

A boy around my age was sprawled across the floor, drawing on a large sheet of paper. A little girl of maybe seven or eight was playing with colored blocks. In the center of the

room, a few children of all ages sat on straw mats on the floor listening to a silver-haired teacher who sat cross-legged, reading aloud from a picture book. Some of the children looked up at us curiously.

You could have been among them. You could have been here, at this school, learning from teachers who'd pay proper attention to you. A silent flood of tears rushed down my cheeks.

No one seemed to notice I was crying, except the girl with blocks, who marched over to me.

"Don't cry," she commanded. "Come and play with me."

"Thanks," I said to her, trying to swallow my sobs and hold my voice steady. "I'll come and play for a bit."

"Why are you thanking me?" Her forehead wrinkled in confusion. "I didn't give you anything."

"I was sad. You made me feel better."

"I made you better?" Her face glowed like a moon, and her plump cheeks dimpled. "I made her better," she announced to Dhanam Aunty. "Who is she, anyway?"

"This is Viji," Celina Aunty said.

"I'm Lalitha. Come." Lalitha took me by the hand and led me to a shelf full of painting supplies.

"Let's paint," she decided. "We must put newspaper on the floor so it doesn't get messy."

The two of us spread out the paper, and we started working. At least, I did. Lalitha selected a brush and chewed on its end thoughtfully.

I dipped my brush in the paint and tried to draw a yellow

circle for the sun. Lalitha was watching, which made me nervous, because I wasn't the best painter.

The lines I drew for the sun's rays came out pretty wobbly. I dropped a bit of blue paint on the bottom by accident, so I smeared it and made a river. Across it, I painted a bridge. On the bridge I painted four stick figures.

"What's that?" Lalitha put her finger on one of the figures.

"A person," I said.

"You are a person. I am a person." She wagged her finger at me. "That is not a person."

"It's the best I can do. What are you going to paint?"

"I can paint well," Lalitha said. "Watch." She swished her brush around on the paper, making a great yellow blob in the top right corner.

"Is that the sun?" I asked.

"No, Viji. The sun is outside. This is just a big yellow dot."

"Right." I smiled.

So we painted dots and lines and all kinds of shapes. We made a mess and had just as much fun cleaning up, skating on the wet floor after we'd mopped.

"That was the best painting class ever," I told Lalitha when it was time for me to leave. "Thanks."

"Come back," she said. "I'll teach you some more."

On the way home, I asked Celina Aunty, "Can I go back there again? Maybe work at the school?"

"Sure," Celina Aunty said. "I may be able to arrange for you to assist the teachers when they need an extra hand. Maybe help with reading or writing or art? And maybe someday you could even teach there."

Since you'd gone, I hadn't given a thought to my dream of becoming a teacher. Celina Aunty's words made my dream glimmer again. Faint and far away, but not lost.

41

BRIDGES

"Let's go for a walk," Arul said when he returned from his lessons at the carpentry shop that afternoon.

"Can't." Muthu scowled. "I have to write *I won't be rude to my teachers* one hundred times."

"Why?" Arul said. "What did you do?"

"This morning, Priya Aunty said, if a fruit vendor asks us for twenty rupees and we give him a fifty-rupee note, what would we have left? And I said it was a silly question, because if a vendor asks us for twenty, I wouldn't give him fifty, I'd bargain him down, not give more than he asks! And she got mad, but I said it was just as important to learn how to bargain as it was to learn subtraction. All the other kids agreed with me, but that only made her madder, and she gave me extra homework."

Arul started lecturing Muthu on staying out of trouble, but I grinned at Muthu. It was good to know he was getting his spark back.

When I recognized where Arul was heading, I stopped, but he wouldn't let me turn around.

Soon, we arrived at the fancy house where Kutti lived. He was out in the yard.

Kutti's coat shone with cleanliness, sparkling in the sunshine like a silk sari. We watched him through the gate, playing with the girl. The gardener was nowhere to be seen.

Praba threw a ball, and he leaped and caught it midair. She patted him, and he licked her hand, looking at her the way he used to look at you.

"What's the point of this trip?" I said to Arul. "To show me Kutti doesn't miss Rukku anymore?"

Before I could stomp off in a huff, Kutti raised his head and galloped toward the gate, barking madly, his tail wagging so fast, it almost disappeared from view.

Praba ran after him, and when she saw us, she swung the gate open. Kutti bounded over, placed his paws on my knees, and pushed me off balance. He'd grown so much larger and stronger. We collapsed together, his tail thumping me.

"Viji!" The girl surprised me by remembering my name. "You don't look nearly as scruffy as you did last time." She sounded disappointed. "What happened?"

"Changed my line of work," I said.

"Where's Rukku?" she said.

"Couldn't come." I buried my face in Kutti's fur. He smelled clean and fresh.

"Want to see the bed I made for Kutti in my room?" Praba asked. "I give him dog biscuits every day, and I wash him once a week with special dog shampoo—"

"Dog shampoo?" They not only had special biscuits for dogs, but even special shampoo?

"Come on," she said. "I'll show you."

"We don't have time now," I said, because I was afraid her mother might not want me in her house, even though she was kind and I was a lot cleaner than I had been. And it was enough to see that Kutti was doing well.

Kutti put a paw on my foot, like he was telling me to stay. But I scratched Kutti behind the ears and got up.

"Go, Kutti," I said. "Go on home."

"When will you visit again?" Praba asked.

"Sometime," Arul said. "Sure."

As we walked away, Kutti gave a little whine, but he didn't try to follow. He knew where he belonged now.

"I thought you would like to see how happy Kutti is," Arul said.

"You've visited him before?" I asked.

"Just once," Arul said. "Long enough to show me two things, Viji. That he still loves us. But love doesn't stop him from living and moving forward, because that's how life moves."

On the way back, we visited our bridge.

We looked for the spot where we'd pitched our tents, but we couldn't tell the exact place. A cool breeze stirred the river as the sun sank down in the sky.

"We should get going," Arul said.

"Just a bit longer," I said. Part of me felt that if you could still talk to me, this was the place where I'd hear your voice loud and clear—here on this bridge, which was the closest we'd had to a happy home.

I whispered your name, again and again, but you never replied.

Or maybe I just didn't hear. All I heard was the river slapping against the bank endlessly.

"It's getting really late," Arul said. "Come on."

Celina Aunty and Muthu were standing in the front yard, peering up and down the street, into the gloom. Muthu waved wildly as soon as he spotted us returning, and Celina Aunty practically ran to the gate to let us in.

"Thank goodness you're here at last, " she said. "What kept you out so long?"

"Told you they'd be fine, Aunty," Muthu said. "Why were you so worried? Because this is the first time Akka and Arul have ever been out on their own in the dark without me, or something?"

"That must be it." She tousled his hair and smiled at us. "But please, next time you want to stay out late, warn me so I don't get scared?"

I promised I would.

And I thought about Celina Aunty and Muthu's concern. It felt good to see them feeling happy that we were back safe.

For the first time since we'd left the bridge, I had the feeling I'd come home.

42

PAST AND PRESENT

After assembly this morning, Celina Aunty beckoned to me to come see her.

"Surely you can't be in trouble again," Arul whispered.

"You said the prayers today." Muthu rushed to defend me. "I saw. I'll tell them, Akka."

"Thanks, Muthu." I ruffled his hair. "I promise I'll let you know if I need your help."

I followed Celina Aunty into her office.

"Sorry to keep you from your class, but it's your lessons I want to discuss with you." She played with a pen on her desk. "We have a good place here—"

"A great place," I said.

"Glad to hear you say that, Viji. I'm happy to see how you have adjusted. But I've been thinking about where you need to be."

"What do you mean?"

"Our teachers aren't used to teaching children as old as you. Or as good at writing and reading as you are. There are larger schools, where you would have greater opportunities. Better facilities."

"You want me to leave?"

"That's not what I'm saying. This can still be your home, Viji, and you can visit Muthu and the rest of us anytime. But there's a good boarding school where some of our children have gone before. I spoke to the head, and she'd welcome you."

"I haven't said I'll go."

"No." She looked me in the eye. "But if you're serious about teaching at a school someday, you'll need to study a lot more and get much better training than we can give you here. Just think it over, okay?"

It's so strange, Rukku. Just when I start thinking of this as my home, Celina Aunty decides I need to move. On and out of here. I know I need to welcome the chance Celina Aunty is offering me.

Except I don't want to go. You were taken from me, and I'm not ready to take myself away from the two best friends I have left.

Not yet.

That evening, Arul and I sat on the bench, watching Muthu chase the little kids, who cackled and screeched. It was good to see him in such high spirits again and to hear him hooting with laughter.

When he came over and joined us, I started telling them about my conversation with Celina Aunty. "She wants to send me to a school—"

"We are at school," Muthu said.

"A bigger school," I said, and explained her offer.

"Super!" Arul thumped me on the back.

"Glad you're so thrilled by the thought of me leaving," I said, watching the kids running about. "But I don't want to go."

"I don't want you to go either," Muthu said. "Stay here, Akka. Never mind what Arul says."

"Don't be silly." Arul's smile left his face, and he got all serious. "She should go. Go and do something she's been dreaming about."

"If I leave, who'd look after Muthu?" I asked.

"I don't need anyone looking after me." Muthu pushed his lip out so far, it looked in danger of falling off his face. "I'll be okay if you go, but I won't like it."

"I won't like it at the other school either," I said. "They'll all probably have nicer dresses. And lots of—"

"You'll always have nicer friends," Arul interrupted. "And nicer family—you'll always have us."

I couldn't argue with that. I put an arm around each of them and drew them closer.

43

OUR FATHER

The next morning I got a visit from our father.

Definitely not the one in heaven.

"How did he know where to find me?" I asked Celina Aunty when she told me he was here to see me. And then the answer came to me. "My letter."

"Probably," Celina Aunty said. "You don't have to see him unless you want to."

"I'll see him," I said.

"Do you want me—or someone else—to stay with you?"

"I'm not scared." If I didn't meet him face-to-face, I'd be afraid he'd try to track me down some other day, when I wasn't in such a safe place. "I'll meet him on my own."

"As you wish." Celina Aunty motioned at the room where he was waiting. "We won't let him take you away by force. But of course, if you decide you want to leave, that's up to you."

Head high, neck maybe a little too stiff, I strode in like a princess. "What do you want?" I said to Appa.

He held out a package, a gift, like he thought it was enough to win me over. I looked at the dark hair sprouting in bushes along his fingers. I could feel his hand coming down across my cheek, whip-fast, leather tough.

"I don't want it," I said. "I don't want anything from you."

His eyes glittered with anger. "You're my daughter," he said. "Mine. I can take the two of you home whether you want to or not."

"You can't," I said. "Not the two of us. Rukku's dead."

"What?" He stared and then whispered, "You're lying."

"No," I said. "I wouldn't lie about something like that!"

A strange sound came from him, a kind of growl that was anger and pain, mixed up. His hand actually trembled. He let the package flop onto Celina Aunty's desk.

Maybe all that Celina Aunty and Arul had said about God and Yesu had made some kind of difference, because all of a sudden, I felt sorry for him, the way he stooped, his arms hanging limp.

On the street, I'd seen dogs fighting. Snarling. Ripping at one another. Until one gave up and tucked its tail between its legs in surrender. That was what Appa reminded me of with his head hanging and his chin almost touching his chest.

Seeing him standing that way, I knew I was larger than he would ever be. For his pitiful sake, I ripped open the package he'd brought. Inside, there were two things. A hand-carved wooden pendant. And a hand-carved doll, just like Marapachi.

"You—you made Rukku a new doll?" I couldn't believe it, but there she was, in my hands, Marapachi's twin. He must have made the old one, too, I realized.

"Yes. I made it for her." He knelt and put his hands together. "Come home. Please. Give me another chance. I'll never, never, never hurt you again."

He shook with sobs, and I put a hand on his shoulder.

Rivers of tears coursed down, crooked, across his cheeks, his stubble-covered chin.

A flash flood of forgiveness rose in my chest. It was a strange kind of forgiveness, mixed with desperate pity and hope. A flood that threatened to drown me if I didn't fight it.

At last, I understood how Amma felt—why she gave in every time he said he was sorry. Understood her eagerness to piece together her shattered image of him. Her need to keep hoping things would get better somehow. She must have felt just as sorry for him as I felt when I saw him kneeling on the ground.

Because at that moment, he truly meant it. He really wanted to be a better man.

I almost did what Amma would have done. I almost gave up the freedom and the future I could have.

That's when I heard your voice, Rukku.

No, you said. *Stay, Viji.*

Your voice was like the beam of a lighthouse, cutting right through my fog of pity.

"No." My voice was calm. My whole body was calm. "This is home now."

"Don't be angry. I'll give you anything, anything—"

"My future is here, Appa."

His knuckles clenched and then unclenched.

"Tell Amma I love her. And don't ever, ever lay a finger on her again."

"Yes." He bowed his head. "And I'll come again to visit you."

"Bring her," I said. "Bring her to visit me."

"I promise," he said.

For the first time in what felt like forever, the touch of his rough hand was gentle on my chin. He held it, held my gaze.

Then he let go and walked out the door, his steps measured, his footfall softened.

I hope he'll keep his promise. But even if he doesn't, his visit left me feeling better.

He took away some of my anger, I think, anger that had been pressing down on my chest. Now that I had let my anger go, it felt like my heart had more room.

After Appa left, I marched up to Celina Aunty, who was waiting anxiously to hear how it all had gone.

"You know that boarding school for girls, the one you wanted to send me to?" I said. "I'll go."

"Yes!" She slammed a fist into her palm. "That's wonderful. You'll be so happy there. I'm so proud of you."

Then the two of us just sat there and smiled and smiled at each other.

At dinner, I told Arul and Muthu about Appa's visit and how much better I'd behaved than I'd ever thought I could.

"There's hope for you yet," Arul said. "Yesu is getting through."

"No," I said. "It was Rukku's voice I heard in my head, not Yesu's."

"Not in your head," Arul said. "You heard her voice in your heart."

Waiting for him to lecture me about you being in heaven, I chewed a mouthful of rice.

But Arul only said, "If you really think the only place Rukku's still alive is inside you, you know what you need to do, right?"

"What?"

"You've got to start loving yourself like you loved her, like you were able to allow yourself to even love your dad."

"Not sure if that was love, exactly," I said. "Anyway, there's something else I need to tell you two."

"What?" Muthu said.

"I'm going to that other school Celina Aunty talked about."

Muthu stuck his tongue out at me, but Arul whooped.

"Yes!" Arul said. "You're going to do so much with your life."

"What if I'm not good enough?" I voiced my fear.

"Then you can come back here," Muthu said. "I hope you're not good enough."

"Don't be silly," Arul said. "She'll become a teacher like she wanted, and she'll build a school for kids like us."

"Who'll you name your school after?" Muthu asked me, as if I were building one already.

"You should name it after our father," Arul said. "Remember? Our father, O. R. T. Narayan. Hallowed be his name."

I was so amazed to hear him joking about God that I said, totally serious, "I'll name it after you, Arul. Rukku and Muthu and you."

"After me?" Muthu grinned. "Then I guess I'd better start paying attention to my lessons."

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WHEREVER YOU ARE

As I write to you now, Rukku, I travel. Back.

I feel the rain on our backs as you crouch on the road, trying to save worms.

I hear you humming to Kutti, holding him close in your comforting arms as a firework explodes on Divali night.

I see your proud smile as you hand the balloon vendor your very own money at the beach.

I see your tongue between your teeth as you concentrate on finishing a bead necklace.

I see your fingertips as you hold the orange the gardener threw at us.

I see you fling your beloved doll at the driver to defend me from danger.

I hear you and Muthu belly laughing together on our bridge.

Your laugh was so strong. So strong it makes me smile, even now, just remembering.

Writing is an odd thing. Writing today, in this book, I realize I sometimes saw things the wrong way around when they were happening.

All this while, I thought I'd looked after you, but now I see it was often the opposite.

You gave me strength.

By never letting me get away with a lie.

By showing me small miracles.

By laughing at all the wrong times.

Together we were such a good team.

And now I'll keep trying, Rukku. To carry your laughter with me and march forward.

To love you but live in today, not in yesterday.

Moving ahead doesn't mean leaving you behind. I finally understand that.

And I guess how you live matters more than how long you live. Every happy moment we had, every bit of love we shared, still glows. We're together in my heart and always will be.

So I'm living with my whole heart, Rukku. And imagining with my whole mind.

Imagining Lalitha, my new friend, all grown up, living on her own, laughing away with Arul and Muthu. Imagining me, all grown up, too, a teacher at last. Imagining you drinking cold,

bubbly soda in a nice, fancy palace and burping louder than Muthu ever could.

Imagining you can hear me say, *I love you, Rukku.*

Imagining so hard, I can almost feel you patting me again, see you beaming, hear you saying, *Rukku loves Viji,* right back.