

Tara stabbed a dot of red to her forehead and ran her finger over her lips. Drawing her face close to the round mirror no bigger than her mouth opened wide, she eyed her tongue, a pink cushion on which words slumbered. She flipped back a corner of the newspaper, spread like a tablecloth on the dresser and slid out the razor blade stored under it with her thumb.

At the sound of caws and beating wings, she stopped, flew to the window, her ears antennaed to Amma and the neighbour talking in hushed tones through the barbed wire fence wrapped in thorn bushes. As Tara suspected, she was the masala for their daily prattle amid samplings of the morning's cooking. Stories of surgical slip-ups shuttled between the two women, their voices entangling. What if her tongue hung out permanently, like a dog's? Better to hire a servant girl as a talking companion, no? But she might pick up the awful accent, the other bleated. A definite no-no. What to do then? Give it another week.

For as long ago as Tara could remember, her speechlessness had tongues wagging among the brahmans whose birthright was sound, chanting a lineage of poets and priests and pandits all the way back to the great sages, the rishis, the lingual acrobats of ancient India, now taken the form of crows. Reincarnated, Amma had said. A splattering from them equalled a blessing, which, of course, Tara had sought, but her tongue remained tethered to the floor of her mouth.

It was time for the scalpel.

Tara's pointed chin thrust forward. Hadn't she reset her dislocated thumb by twisting it back into place? Hadn't she knocked out a loosened tooth with a stone? Hadn't she dug out a deeply embedded thorn from her heel with a safety pin? Nothing to this. She was not going to let anyone mess with her tongue. Three heel-thumping strides back to the mirror and snarling in silence she prepared to cut the whitish band of tissue underneath her tongue, its tip tucked inward and forming a double scallop. Thumb and forefinger tightened their pincer grip and up the blade flashed, past a ladder of hooks and eyelets, stitched close to prevent any accidental exposure of skin, on a green blouse matching her green, mango-print skirt. Green for healing. That's what Amma had said when she'd pierced the ears of her three daughters with a sewing needle, leaving a loop of turmeric-coated thread behind, and, later, a clean shaven neem twig, and finally the thick-stemmed gold earrings. Tara swabbed her mind with green, but inches above a gold chain around her throat her hand trembled and the double-edged steel shimmered and shivered.

And slipped, carving a lopsided crescent on the face of her right thumb.

She frowned at the thin curved line pumping crimson. It was a crooked, smiling mouth.

My first facial feature.

By the end of the week, she had refined my features, defining the black dots and the whites of my eyes, thick eyelashes, and a straight nose with perfectly winged nostrils, with her poster paints. I could have been her twin, except that I had a longer, prouder neck whereas hers disappeared between two bony shoulders pushed up to her ears. And my skin was pinker than

hers. Whorled, of course, like the tight spiral on a salagrama. She protected me with a plastic candy wrapper when she bathed, cleansing me separately using a bud of cotton moistened with a drop of rosewater.

For my mouth, she became adventurous and innovative. In addition to the appetizing pinks, reds and oranges, she experimented with green and blue, long before such lip colours grew to be a vogue in the West. She dressed me up in frocks and gowns made of scraps of cotton and nylon and silk from the tailor's shop (Amma's needle mended emergency rips and tears, including some on the skin). Tara even made me a wig out of her own black curls. Less than an inch, the hair fell straight and stiff. At least she left it unadorned, without the wilting string of jasmine that dangled from her double braids.

Initially I was far too curious about my surroundings to notice Tara's silence. After all, there were many things in the house – shabby and vintage – that did not speak, even if they creaked or groaned. Or wept, like the chandelier whose frozen teardrops made me shudder. Sometimes a dog barked self-consciously. Deafened by the radio I did not immediately hear the female voices, their volume switching from soft to loud depending on the language of a pair of leather slippers worn by the head of the family, Appa. He was the only one who wore slippers inside the house. Those times when the slippers stomped around discontentedly and the sound of whispering voices died down, Tara did not venture out of the bedroom, which was fine with me because I loved hopping over bangles and combs and hairpins and powder puffs and oil spills, sometimes grabbing a word here, a word there, from the newspaper on the dresser.

I backed away from the picture of a charred body surrounded by a ring of spectators and dove into a handcrafted jewellery box offering endless delight, rubbing my nose against the gold and silver ornaments to get rid of the smell of petrol and kerosene and burning flesh. Any lingering confusion spun away when I whirled like a one-legged ballerina on a round pendant, the same pinkish yellow as the chain around Tara's neck. A horizontal S split the circle in two mangoes, each with a bumpy dot, like the beady eye of a lizard. Why was she not wearing it? When I framed the question, Tara slapped a finger on my lips as if afraid someone might hear. My eyes, evading discipline, roamed past her in small circles coming back each time to the dresser.

Two wooden arms soared high bearing an oval, mirror-less plywood. On this Amma had stuck a compact mirror just big enough to adjust the dot on the forehead, to check the eyes or nostrils or mouth. Only in parts. Appa had smashed the original mirror so the girls would not beautify themselves. The many suitors for his eldest daughter were already beginning to enrage him. How dare someone take away his precious possession? The girls could not even smuggle a stainless steel or silver plate to their bedroom because then the servants might be accused of the theft. Since Amma, too, feared that a mirror would make them vain, they stole reflections of themselves from any polished surface, including the gleaming chrome headlamps of their Daimler and the Austin Princess. Tiny as I was, I could see my entire face and body in the round mirror or even on a spoon and made small adjustments to my face, hair and clothes. I turned this way and that way, checking myself from all angles.

It was 1965.

Newly made and pulsing with life, I sprang up at the softest fall of approaching footsteps. Tara immediately folded a white cotton handkerchief over me. I looked like the Irish nuns at her convent school. Once when I was hanging out of the window of the school bus, I heard a parrot sing out, hello, hello from a wood and wire contraption as coins clattered into the beggar's tin cup. Tara could not even say 'hello' clearly, so she still templed her hands in a

namaskaram that many here in Tiruchirapalli had dropped for the fashionable hello. The diminutive and deceptively simple 'hi', introduced by American comic books, awaited acceptance as youngsters and adults exploded into laughter, fights and tears over the pronunciation. Should it be *hee* or *hye* or *hai*?

Already a subject of mockery, Tara decided to stay away from that volatile word as well.

The following Sunday acquainted me with the family. Tara and her sisters sat on the veranda, legs splayed, their varied green skirts hitched up to the knees. A green paste of marudhani leaves picked from their backyard thimble their toes and fingertips. Only the feet, aside from the waist-length curly hair, showed the three girls were sisters. From the knobby ankle to the low arch to the long toes, they could have been triplets.

'That means we'll dominate the man we marry,' Padmini said, stretching her second toe over her big toe.

Tara shook her head, no.

'Say the word.'

Tara shook her head again, her face drawn in a bulldog scowl.

'You should force yourself to speak. Give your tongue a chance to cut free on its own. Surgery has its complications.' Oh, how Padmini's tongue danced inside her mouth! 'And stop frowning.'

Tara said something that sounded like 'oh'. Sounds that involved the tongue rising were difficult. The medical term for the tongue-tie was ankyloglossia the pronouncing of which produced a froth of spit in Tara's mouth.

'Good.' Padmini squeezed her hand. 'And was the no to dominate or to marry?'

Lungfuls of air rushed out of Tara's mouth, but no words. Saliva dribbled down her chin. And the word that finally came out was pitifully lacking. 'Mavvy,' Tara lisped, wiping her mouth on the sleeve of her blouse.

'See? You can do it.'

'Yuck. I've had quite enough of this,' Cordelia said, getting up. Cordelia, I was quick to notice, spoke with the same tongue-tucked sophistication of the voices on BBC radio that played all day.

'Talk respectfully. She's older than you,' Padmini said.

'I was referring to this.' Cordelia wiggled her marudhani capped fingers and toes, her eyes growing round and innocent. She had the same round face and round curls as the angels painted on the ceiling of their school chapel. 'And besides, she has to earn my respect. This whole Indian system of respecting our elders is utter rubbish.'

'Don't let her bully you,' Padmini said, watching Cordelia's broomstick body disappear around the corner. Exaggerated sounds of splashing water followed. 'And of course you will get married. So will I. So will Cordelia.' Then Padmini tapped Tara's foot with hers. 'You know, you are like your kohlapuris. You mould to people so easily. You accept them as they are. But sometimes you bite.'

Tara shook her head, no.

'Oh yes, you do. And I am sure you're tough as leather too. And Amma is like her rubber slippers. So soft, so pliable. It's as though she doesn't have a backbone.'

Tara said something completely unintelligible to me in a thin, buttermilk voice.

'Yes, Appa's a boot,' Padmini said, guessing and adding appropriate consonants. They both laughed.

'Co'ia?'

'Cordelia? Hmm. Let's see. Too early to tell. She's like a slipper that is being made.'

A year younger than Tara, ten-year-old Cordelia acted and behaved like a four-year old. ‘You?’ Tara asked, and lisped out the words, ‘Glass slipper?’

‘No,’ Padmini said with a toss of her head. ‘Glass is too fragile. I am a diamond slipper.’

In reality, Padmini was like a lotus, just like her name. She exuded a natural fragrance. Her blemish-free skin had a dewy softness giving the impression it might easily bruise. But not once did I imagine that her back, straight as a queen’s, would one day snap like the stem of a wine glass. I gazed and gazed at her.

Next to her, Tara sat, shoulders hunched. With her widely spaced eyes, yellow skin and thin, flat body she looked more like a lizard. Because she did not speak very much, stagnant saliva gave her mouth a bad odour. Still, if someone asked me, who was the fairest of them all, I would say, Tara, of course. Misplaced loyalty. I turned away and looked at the empty earthen bowl. The dried paste sticking to the sides was now more blackish than green and looked like a murder of crows pecking at a human figure. I moved back, afraid, and hid my fear behind my permanent smile.

Padmini shook Tara’s arm. ‘Come, let’s wash up. Or the red may start to blacken.’ Of a wild variety, the marudhani’s stain ranged from yellow-orange to a deep crimson. ‘What’s this?’ Padmini crooked a finger around Tara’s right thumb sticking out from the rest of her fingers. ‘And does your little friend have a name?’

Again, a consonant-free, wet vowel from Tara.

‘No name? Of course she must have a name. How about Gayatri? It means Rising Sun. I used to keep whispering “Gayatri” when you were in Amma’s belly. That’s what she was going to name you at first and then she changed her mind and named you “Tarangani” instead. She’s so fickle. Actually, I like Tara too. Tara, star. A bright, scintillating star.’ This sounded as if Padmini realized her folly and was trying to make up for her tactless remark, because Tara was anything but scintillating. ‘Yes, Gayatri. And you could call her Yatri for short.’ Shifting her ever soft, gentle voice (that Appa, quoting Shakespeare, considered an excellent thing in a woman), to a high pitch, she squeaked in a puppet voice. ‘Yatri would be fine.’

Yatri. I loved my name. Yatri, Yatri, Yatri. I scratched the name on the gaudily painted pink, blue, green and yellow walls. Yatri: pilgrim.

That very morning, during bathroom traffic hour, I got to see the owner of the leather slippers heading to London. London was a popular euphemism for the toilet. Minutes afterward, the slippers stormed into the hall, the hub of the house, with an indoor swing, its wooden plank as big as a bed. ‘JG!’ he raged.

JG – Jasmine Garden – (Amma always wore a wreath of jasmine on her hair) far from being an endearment, it sounded like a curse word. At six foot two, he dominated the room. His face was red and puffy and his chin had begun to gather folds.

Amma’s bare feet entered softly, hesitantly, with only the ting of her toe ring sounding on the floor, the illuminating blue from the dining room walls making it seem as though she were stepping from a rainwashed sky. She wiped her hands on her turmeric yellow sari. The titillating odour of mustard, red chillies and curry leaves fried in ghee, which Amma garnished her curries with, floated out of the kitchen and spiced the air.

‘Which nincompoop used the mug last? Which incompetent fool kept the handle facing away?’ His temper escalated with the hot curry fragrance. Like all houses in the neighbourhood, ours had only one bathroom separated from the main part of the house by the back door.

'Must have been Thangama. She was cleaning the bathroom,' Amma said, blaming the most believable, absent party. Amma could not take the blame because as a good Hindu wife, she always woke well before the crack of dawn and finished her ablutions.

'I want that woman kicked out. Right now. That buffalo, that nincompoop,' Appa sputtered, his voice tripping over itself.

Thangama had been fired many times and rehired as many times.

Appa glowered at everyone, uncertain where to direct his anger. He glared at Padmini beginning a sketch in the Ravi Varma style. A grudging look of appreciation glinted from his eyes, but no word of praise. 'Raja Ravi Varma,' Appa laughed as he strode away, his high-worn belly moving upward in short jerks. 'Brilliant artist. Brilliant entrepreneur.'

Was it you? Padmini asked with her eyes and a lift of her chin and her eyebrows.

Tara nodded. Yes, she had been the last to wash up and had forgotten to position the handle for the next user.

Padmini rolled her eyes.

At the entrance to his room, Appa turned around, the orange glow from his walls giving him a devilish look. He dabbed his thickset neck with a white towel draped over his shoulders like a short cape. *Had he seen their exchange of glances? Did he suspect it was Tara?*

'JG,' he said to Amma, still standing at the kitchen doorway. 'You may go see the Old Man sometime if you wish. Tell him I'll pay fifty thousand for the Ganesha.'

The Old Man was Amma's music teacher, whose true talent lay in storytelling. What was so special about this Ganesha?

Appa's eyes fell on me. My mouth turned dry. 'What's that monstrosity on your hand?' he asked.

Tara's chest heaved, her shoulders rose and her cheeks pushed and pushed out a nearly complete, but somewhat deformed word. 'Th-oll.'

I flinched, as though a whip struck me. How could she have said I was a doll? Tara was ashamed of me. . . Would she want to get rid of me? I wished I were the mistress of my own life. Not her finger puppet. Doll, indeed.

'Do something about her goddamn tongue. Or I'll slice that bloody thing off myself. I would rather she not talk at all than have to listen to this!' Appa left shortly after with an 'I'm off' thrown lightly over his shoulder to Amma, who remained within call.

The house relaxed.