When Amma Went Away

Devika Rangachari
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Mrs. Anand leaned forward and took another coconut barfi from the pretty blue plate on the glass table. 'That is three,' thought Nalini sourly. 'Five more to go, and she will finish them all, I suppose.'

"You have such a talented mother," Mrs. Anand beamed at Nalini, causing that disgruntled individual to pull her face hurriedly into a smile. "She is so good at her job and so good at cooking. My barfis are never so soft."

"These aren't soft," observed Arun, eyeing the plate hopefully. "They should be more squishy, shouldn't they be, Amma?"

"Squishy? What word is that?" laughed his mother and shook her head at her hungry eight-year-old son. "No more, Arun. Then you will never eat your dinner and it is nearly time."

Mrs. Anand took the hint much to Nalini's relief and stood up, brushing crumbs off her ample body. "Congratulations again, Mrs. Ramanujan," she said.
"These sweets were just for starters. When you come back from Singapore, I will take a really proper treat from you."

"Oh, sure," smiled Mrs. Ramanujan. "You will have to wait for about five months for that."

Nalini's heart sank as she heard these words. It was so difficult to accept the fact that her mother would be away from home for so long. Mrs. Ramanujan was being sent to Singapore by her office for some research-based project. They had heard the news only that morning.

"You should be proud of your mother," their father had said after Amma had announced the news and had gone to the kitchen to make something special for the occasion. "She tells me that there were seven people in line for this offer and they selected her as the best of the lot. Isn't that great?"

"But Singapore?" Nalini protested, not troubling to lower her voice so that her mother probably heard her. "When will she go? And we won't see her for ages! What will we do? And..."

"So many questions!" Mr. Ramanujan frowned in mock dismay. "Don't worry so much, Nalini. We have to work things out and there will be some changes. However, one thing is clear, we must see that Amma makes full use of this opportunity. She deserves all this and more."

"Will Amma send chocolates from there?" queried Arun, his eyes suddenly gleaming at the thought.

Nalini clicked her tongue impatiently. Trust a silly eight-year-old to ask such a question! At fourteen-and
a-half years, she felt so much older and wiser than Arun. And Amma had called her a responsible girl only last week. She was about to say something scathing in reply when Amma walked in with a tray of barfis.

"There, I made these," she announced triumphantly, "in celebration."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" chanted Arun and made a beeline for the sweets.

"Nalini, come and taste them," urged her mother, flopping down at the dining-table. She darted a worried look at her daughter. The girl was twisting her long plait around, a deep frown on her face.

"Go on," her father gave Nalini a little push and she found herself at the table.

Reaching out for a barfi, she burst out, "Amma, when do you leave? Will it be before my Science test? What about...?"

Mrs. Ramanujan patted Nalini's hand reassuringly. "I am not leaving immediately, so don't worry. The earliest I can go is in a fortnight's time. We have to make arrangements for you and Arun. I have told them that at the office."

"What arrangements?" the barfi was turning to paste in Nalini's mouth. She hated changes of any kind and this was proving to be worse than what she thought.

"Well, someone will have to look after you while I am away," said her mother reasonably. "We will have to work out something."

"Why? Appa is here," began Nalini mutinously.

"Appa works till seven, Nalini," her mother said. He is never home before eight at the earliest. Who is
to look after you and Arun all day? Muniamma can't
do it, she is too young, and I don't like the idea of
hiring another maid."

"I can," said Nalini, thrusting her chin forward. "You
said I am responsible. You said that only last week.
I am fourteen and in Class IX. Arun is only a kid! I will
make him behave himself and...and I will learn to cook."
Her face suddenly brightened. "And Aditi can come
here every day and help me and..."

"Talk sense, Nalini," said her mother gently. "I know
you are very responsible and in a few years I am sure
I can leave everything to you. Right now you are too
young to manage alone and Arun too. And I am sure
Aditi's mother won't like the idea of her staying
here half the time. What about her studies? And yours?
No! Appa and I will think of something, someone to
take such good care of you that you won't miss me
at all."

The easy tears came to Nalini's eyes and she turned
her face away, blinking furiously. How could anyone
take her mother's place? How was she to manage all
her tests and assignments without her mother's help?
Who was she to tell her problems while Amma was
away; all about her fights with Richa and Meghna?
The doorbell had rung just at that time announcing
Mrs. Anand, their neighbour, and Nalini had to sit down
and be polite. Amma had a soft corner for her since
she had no children and was so obviously fond of Arun
and Nalini. She looked at Arun's serene face. He didn't
have a care in the world—the silly kid—in Class III and
such a baby! Life was really difficult at times!
After dinner Amma and Appa sat down to a serious discussion while Arun took out his animal jigsaw puzzles. Nalini tried to read for a while but the words on the page kept jumping before her eyes. With a sigh of disgust she went to her room and took out some pending homework. Mrs. Mehra would have a fit if the diagrams of the human eye were not drawn properly, so Nalini tried hard to concentrate on her work. Just then Arun poked his head around the door.

"Appa and Amma are calling you," he said briefly and disappeared. Nalini wondered what her parents had decided in such a short while and went to them with some trepidation.

"Sit here," her mother patted the seat next to her and Nalini snuggled down in the huge sofa. Arun was perched on his father's lap and humming like an aeroplane ready for take-off.

"Keep quiet, Arun!" said Nalini immediately. "I hate that sound."

"This is Amma's plane," said Arun importantly and hummed louder to irritate Nalini.

"Now listen, you two," began their father, "we have made some plans, though they are still tentative."

"What is tentative?" asked Arun.

"It means that they are not final yet," said his mother.

"We have to make some phone calls and by tomorrow evening we should know."

"What is it?" demanded Nalini, her heart beating fast.

"Keep quiet, Arun."

"We are calling your grandmother here," said Mr. Ramanujan, "and we are sure she will agree."
"Grandmother?" began Nalini, still bewildered.

"Your mother's mother—Patti. You have just one grandmother," said Mr. Ramanujan amusedly.

"But why Patti?" began Nalini, her face taking on a stubborn look. "She is a hundred years old, at least she looked that when we met her last. She has never been here. Why should she come to Delhi now?"

"She will if we ask her," said Mr. Ramanujan briefly. "And this is the ideal solution, Nalini, so don't argue about it."

"She has never been here!" Nalini's eyes filled with tears. "I am telling you I can look after things. Why don't you...?"

"That is enough!" said Mr. Ramanujan sternly. "She has never been here because she had some property to look after and she could never get away. The property was sold last year, so she will be free to come now. It is the next best thing to having Amma here."

Nalini flounced out of the room. She knew she was behaving badly. She ought to have been happy for Amma's sake but somehow she could not help herself. She resented the thought of Amma going and anyone else coming to manage their lives. And Patti of all people who had never stepped out of her house in Chennai and had never had much to do with her grandchildren except for enquiries in her letters! Nalini had always found Patti's letters very boring. She would listen dutifully while Amma read them out but they were full of details about unknown relatives and friends and so on.

Nalini and Arun had been to see her only twice—
once when Nalini was seven and Arun was one, of which Nalini hardly remembered anything and again when Nalini was nine. They had gone to attend Amma's niece's wedding and had stayed in Path's old rambling house. Nalini clearly remembered the musty smell of the huge library and the cockroaches rustling in the bathroom at night. Patti had just been one of a confusing blur of relatives who had exclaimed over her and Arun, and asked questions about Delhi. Nalini had clung to Amma all the while, hating every minute and wishing they were far away.

Patti was a virtual stranger and she was to come here and take Amma's place and tell them what to do. It was not fair! Perhaps if she had known Patti better, she would not have minded so much.

"Nalini," her father's gentle voice was right behind her and she jumped. "Come, let us go to your room. I want to say something to you."

Once in her room, he shut the door and turned to her. "Nalini, in all your arguing and crying, have you thought for a minute how Amma feels?"

"How does Amma feel?" retorted Nalini. "She is glad to go and..."

"Not any more," said her father abruptly. "She told me now that if you feel so bad about things, she will leave this chance. Perhaps another one will come when you are older."

Nalini's face flamed in confusion and distress. She suddenly felt very small. "I didn't mean..." she began. "I mean..."

"I know what you mean," said Mr. Ramanujan gently.
"It is a shock to you that Amma is going away for so long and that things will be different somehow. Don’t you think we can manage for a few months—that too with Patti here? Amma has worked so hard for this opportunity. What is the use if she lets it go so easily?"

Nalini was silent, her mind a whirl of thoughts, but feeling very guilty. She would love Amma to stay, but at nearly fifteen, was she not old enough to manage things? After all, when Amma had fallen ill with a viral infection last month, Nalini had almost stepped into her shoes for two whole days.

"If you show such a bad grace over her going," her father was saying, "you will make her feel guilty about everything. Come on, can’t we do this much for Amma?"

Nalini looked up, her mind suddenly made up. "Appa, I am sorry about everything. Of course, we can manage. I will go and tell Amma now."

"That is my girl," smiled Appa as Nalini sped off to find her mother.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Amma for the hundredth time. "The slightest problem and I will cancel everything. Tell me."

"No, no, Amma," insisted Nalini, wishing she felt as confident as she sounded. "Don’t worry. We will manage—Appa and I. We can look after Arun too."

"Six months is the outer limit I have been given," said Amma thoughtfully. "Who knows? I may even come back sooner, say, in three-four months if I can tie up everything."

"I will keep my fingers crossed," grinned Nalini,
hugging her mother. "And I will write to you about all my tests and things so that you can pray for me."

The next day, at break-time, Nalini dragged Aditi off to a corner of the hockey field and told her everything.

"Gosh! Why didn't you tell me earlier?" Aditi's eyes were wide with surprise and speculation.

"Because that creep Shalini was standing right behind us at the bus-stop," retorted Nalini. "I don't want her and Meghna and Richa to gossip about my family."

"That is true, Nalini," Aditi nodded her head sagely.

"Well, if I were you, I would tell the whole world about it. It is a great honour for aunty, isn't it?"

Nalini felt a glow of pride at this. "Yes, she was chosen out of seven people. And they are all top-level researchers."

"Goodness knows how people study all their lives!" Aditi laughed ruefully. "Research and all! You have got your brains straight from aunty, haven't you?"

"From my father too," said Nalini slowly. "He was a gold medallist in economics in college. Like my mother was in history."

To anyone else, this would have sounded like boasting. But the two girls had a special understanding by which they could always speak their minds to each other. Aditi had joined the school three years back and been made to sit beside Nalini. The new girl soon made her dislike of studies known to her partner. Nalini, who was excellent in most subjects except maths and science, was appalled by Aditi's attitude.

"I will help you with difficult things, if you like," she had offered.
"Thanks. There is no need really," Aditi had said. "You see, when I want to work, I can. But I don’t see the point in killing myself to get marks."

Nalini had left it at that. The two girls gradually found themselves being drawn to each other. Matters had been helped by Aditi moving into Nalini’s neighbourhood, so the girls could meet everyday and discuss school and so on. They made a most unlikely pair. Aditi, tall and gangling with short hair in a ponytail, towered over the diminutive Nalini with her long hair and thin frame. Their natures, too, were strikingly different. Nalini was serious, sensitive and inclined to be short-tempered whereas Aditi was calm, placid and sensible, and could always soothe her friend when she was in the throes of some problem.

She considered Nalini’s face now and said, "Hey, what is wrong?"

"It sounds really silly," Nalini frowned, "but Aditi, I don’t like the idea of my grandmother coming to look after us."

"Why?" demanded Aditi. "That sounds a good idea to me."

"Because, I don’t know her at all, Aditi," complained Nalini. "She is almost a stranger to us—Arun and I. Imagine living with a stranger for six months!"

"You won’t remain like that for long," laughed Aditi. "You will get to know her well enough. She is probably just like your mother." Seeing her friend’s troubled face, she added, "And if she is like a monster or something, you can always come over. Or I will come there."

'Yes, that option is always there,' Nalini cheered up
immediately. "What a good thing we are neighbours! There goes the bell and I haven't eaten my sandwich yet. Come on. Let us rush back to class."

The days simply sped by after that. Patti was called and she agreed to come to Delhi. Closing the big house would take some time, however, so she would arrive two days after Amma left. The big brown leather suitcase was taken down from the top of the cupboard and dusted. Amma took leave from the office to pack and set things in order. Nalini helped but was finally reduced to bodily lifting Arun out of the open suitcase several times a day.

"Wait till Amma goes," she scolded. "You will have to behave then or you will get it from me!"

"And you will get it from Patti," retorted Arun gleefully. The excitement of packing and preparations was so much for him that he was delighted staying at home to watch the fun rather than playing in the park. Aditi was a great help. Mrs. Malik would send her over with some cooked dish or the other so that Amma would be free to concentrate on other things. Often Amma would cry, "Oh, I need a new tube of toothpaste" or "I must remember to buy cold cream" and the two girls would take the money and scurry off to the market at the end of the road to purchase these items.

At long last, the day of Amma's departure dawned. It was a Friday but Nalini had begged to be allowed to miss school and come to the airport instead. Arun was at home too, insisting he took his cricket bat along for the car journey. Amma said goodbye to Mrs. Anand,
who was peering excitedly over the fence, and to Muniamma, the maidservant, who was giggling in excitement. The suitcases were strapped on to the car and they were off. Nalini held on tightly to Amma’s hand all the way, while she exchanged last-minute instructions with Appa. Then they were at the airport and everything happened so fast that it was a blur to Nalini. She waved goodbye to Amma, trying not to cry and swallowing hard till she went out of sight. Arun suddenly looked woebegone, dropped his bat and blinked hard.

"Come on, pick it up," said Nalini in a gentler tone than usual.

"When will Amma be back?" he demanded, his mouth quivering.

"In a few months," said Mr. Ramanujan and led the way back to the car. Nalini sighed several times on the way home. Somehow she felt that those 'few months' would not be easy.
Patti Arrives

Patti arrived on Monday morning. Arun, at least, was reconciled to Amma’s absence by now. She had already called twice from Singapore to say that all was well and he had long talks with her.

"Can't we go to the station?" he had asked hopefully.

"No," Appa was firm. "You have already missed school on Friday. I will go alone and pick her up. She will be here when you get back from school."

"I will see her first then!" whooped Arun, "before Nalini. Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Arun, being in the primary section of Godwin School, got home at 1 p.m. everyday, whereas Nalini, who was in the senior school at Greenview Academy, got home only at 2 p.m. Amma was always there when Arun returned, for she worked only in the mornings. However, if she needed to stay back in the office for some reason, Mrs. Anand was told and she would keep Arun at her place till Amma got back. Arun liked being with Mrs. Anand for that good lady plied him with all sorts of fancy food and drink in the firm belief that a small boy like Arun was always ravenous.

She was there today, peering over the fence, as Nalini left for the bus-stop.

"Your grandmother is coming today, isn't she, beta?" she asked eagerly. Nalini nodded. "Then I will come to see her in the evening, okay?"

"Okay, Aunty," Nalini sped off, her mood darkening. It had felt so weird getting ready for school without Amma to give her toast and milk and help plait her
hair. She had taken so long over her hair that a layer of cream had formed on the milk, which she hated. Arun had been a nuisance. Appa had got him ready early and he had run around the house, deliberately banging into things and imitating an aeroplane in flight. Muniamma had handed Nalini her tiffin box at the last minute.

"What is in it?" she demanded, though she knew the answer.

"Bread and jam," replied the harried servant. Muniamma felt a little breathless today with the extra work, and being only a year older than Nalini, felt unsure and apprehensive about the expected arrival. Would Nalini's Patti like her or would she chase her out of the house? Arun banged into her and she giggled.

"What is in my tiffin?" demanded the small boy.

"Same thing as in mine obviously," snapped Nalini.

"What did you expect? Cake?"

"Will Patti make sweets for me when she comes?" Arun asked his father who was looking for his car keys.

"Ask her nicely and see," Mr. Ramanujan said absent-mindedly. "Come on, you two. I have to leave for the railway station. Out you go now."

Aditi was pacing up and down at the bus-stop while Shalini was giggling with some other girls.

"I thought you were bunking today," said Aditi.

"My father wouldn't let us," replied Nalini. "And anyway, I don't think there is a need for such a welcome committee. Patti will be here for a long time now."

Aditi looked thoughtfully at her friend and then turned away.
"I suppose they are giggling about us," Nalini stared angrily at Shalini and the others.

"What creeps! You are in a bad mood," said Aditi mildly. "If they are giggling, then let them. Don't let it bother you."

The bus came round the corner stopping further argument. However, Nalini's black mood persisted through the day. She found herself unable to concentrate and kept wondering how to greet Patti after all these years. Would she expect to be kissed and hugged or would a mere 'Hello, Patti' suffice? It was a good thing that Patti knew English. Otherwise she would have felt shy talking to her in Tamil. She wished she had paid more attention to Patti's letters. What was she really like? Did she like children or didn't she? Would she be like Amma or totally different? She could hardly remember her face.

"Something on your mind, Nalini?" a faintly amused voice broke in on her thoughts and she sat up abruptly.

"No. No, ma'am," she said hurriedly.

"I just wondered," said Mrs. Rao. "You have a faraway look in your eyes. Shakespeare is not a thing to be taken lightly, is that clear?"

"Sorry, ma'am," Nalini was red in the face and Aditi gave her a sympathetic smile. Suppressed sniggers were heard at one end of the big airy classroom and Mrs. Rao turned around sharply. Nalini might be daydreaming but she was an excellent student otherwise and the teacher was very fond of her.

"Richa, you seem to find something very amusing," she snapped. "Why not share the joke with us?"
It was Richa's turn to go red in the face. She ran a hand through her short hair. "It is n...nothing, ma'am," she stammered. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Good!" said Mrs. Rao crisply. "Now perhaps we can get on with the lesson."

Nalini felt very miserable. She was rarely caught on the wrong foot in class. For the rest of the period, she concentrated hard. She was still frowning over a verse when Richa stalked up to her desk.

"Whom are you trying to impress?" she asked loudly. "Rao ma'am has gone." Nalini felt a wave of anger but Richa went on, "Teacher's pet! No one can say anything about you or Rao ma'am gets angry. Some girls have all the luck!"

"Hurry up, Nalini," said Aditi before Nalini could react. "Come fast, or we will miss the bus."

"I think, Richa is jealous of you," she told Nalini later. "Don't answer her when she makes such remarks."

"That is what Amma keeps telling me," Nalini said and sighed. "Oh, dear, I miss her so much already!"

When they alighted at their bus-stop, Aditi said, "All the best," and walked down the road in the direction of her house. Nalini sighed and set off reluctantly in the opposite direction. The houses were all alike on the street—whitewashed with ornamental gates and a small garden. In fact, it was quite possible to mistake one house for another. Aditi had faced this problem when she first moved in and had kept unlatching the wrong gate, much to Nalini's amusement.

"This is silly!" Aditi had protested. "We lived in a multi-storeyed building earlier and there was no
confusion like this. Look at these gates. Can't they paint them in different colours? How can you tell them apart in the dark or if you are in a hurry?"

"You will get used to it," Nalini had replied. "See, your house is the fifth one from mine. So just keep counting as you walk. Simple, isn't it?" And she had grinned wickedly at her enraged friend.

There was no mistaking their house today. Arun was swinging on the gate and when he saw Nalini, he increased his speed so that the creaks and rattles grew impossibly loud.

"Patti has come! Patti has come!" he called out.

"Don't yell like that!" snapped Nalini. "And stop that swinging at once. You are making an awful noise."

"I shall not!" retorted Arun. "Tell me nicely, only then I will stop."

Nalini clicked her tongue in exasperation but before she could say anything, the front door opened and Patti came out.

"Arun, please stop that noise," she said in a tone that was soft yet peremptory.

The little boy promptly jumped off the gate and ran past his grandmother. Nalini, meanwhile, had been staring at Patti in some confusion. She was not a hundred years old, but looked about as old as Khanna aunty who had just celebrated her 60th birthday. She was wearing a nine-yard sari in the typical madusar style traditional to the South and her gray hair was drawn back neatly into a pointed bun. Diamonds sparkled in her ears and nose and her spectacles gleamed in the sunlight.
"Nalini, come, my child," she said now, stretching out her hands. "How you have grown! It has been so long since I saw you!"

Nalini submitted to being hugged and smiled shyly at her grandmother. There was no need for her to say anything—Patti was doing all the talking. There was no sign of Arun. He was probably sulking in his room. "Go, wash and change," said Patti. "You must be really hungry. I will lay the table for you."

"It is okay, Patti. Muniamma will do that," said Nalini somewhat hesitantly.

"No, she won’t," said Patti firmly. "While I am here, I will see to the cooking and the table. Muniamma’s job will only be to clean the house and wash dishes—nothing else."

"Oh," Nalini sounded uncertain. Well, this was the first of the changes then. Amma was always so tired when she returned that Muniamma saw to everything. Amma only cooked the night meal. While she washed her hands, she wondered what Muniamma thought of these changes. She changed her clothes and then sat down at the table. Arun was nowhere to be seen.

"I will call him," said Nalini and got up. She went to Arun’s bedroom and sure enough, Arun was there lying on the bed with a very disgruntled expression on his face.

"Come and eat," ordered Nalini. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I won’t come," said Arun obstinately. "You scold me, Patti scolds me, everyone hates me. I wish Amma were here."

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"Oh, don't be so stupid!" exclaimed Nalini, her temper beginning to rise. "You were making such a racket on the gate. What did you expect?"

"I won't come," repeated Arun pursing his lips and looking mutinous.

"Don't then!" snapped Nalini. "It is only two days since Amma left, and you behave like this! You are a rotten, spoilt brat!"

Arun burst into tears and cried noisily.

"Why don't you go and start eating, Nalini?" said Patti's voice from the doorway. "I will see to him."

Nalini was so angry that she did not trust herself to speak. How dare Arun behave as if she had tortured him or something! She stalked out of the room and went to the table. Just as she started eating, Arun came out of the room, all smiles, and his hand in Patti's.

Peace reigned in the house now but there was turmoil in Nalini's mind. Despite all her ranting, she had badly wanted to make a good impression on Patti. And now Arun with his crying had made her look like a fool, as if she could not handle her younger brother! She tried to swallow down the lump in her throat and blink the tears out of her eyes. She was furious with herself too. Why did she always have to cry when she was angry? To her dismay, Patti saw her silent struggle and patted her hand.

"You must be tired, Nalini, it is so hot today. Go and sleep after this. We will talk in the evening. There is so much to tell you."

Nalini grunted something and hastily swallowed her
food, almost choking on it. She knew Arun was trying to catch her eye, but she avoided looking at him. Back in her room, she shut the door and lay on the bed, her eyes closed. What a day it had been! If Amma had been there, she would have told her all about Richa and Mrs. Rao over lunch. But meal times would not be the same for a long time. The door opened a crack and Arun peeped in.

"Go away," said Nalini immediately. "Get lost!"

"But..." began Arun.

"Shut the door!" said Nalini fiercely and this time Arun obeyed her.

Almost without realizing it, Nalini fell asleep. She did not hear Patti talking to Arun or Muniamma dropping a dish with a loud clatter. She did not hear Arun opening the door again hesitantly and darting in to get a pencil. She did not hear the loud creak of the gate when Muniamma went home for a couple of hours. When she finally awoke, it was past four and she could hear Arun bouncing his ball on the driveway. The loud ring of the telephone made her sit up in the bed wiping the last bits of sleep from her eyes. "Hello...hello...hello!" she heard Patti say. "Hello!"

Running to the drawing-room, she tapped Patti on the shoulder. "Let me answer it."

"I am a little deaf, Nalini!" said Patti apologetically. "I couldn't hear anything."

It was Aditi on the line. "Just called to find out how things are," she said. "Did your grandmother pick up the phone? I kept saying 'hello' but I don't think she heard me."
"I know," Nalini said, trying to suppress a twinge of irritation.

"Well, can you come over or should I?"

"You come," said Nalini. "I don't think I can go anywhere today."

"No, that wouldn't be right," agreed Aditi. "Right. I will be there in five minutes."

Nalini went to change her clothes and wash her face. Arun was still playing in the garden.

"What do you drink in the evenings? Plain milk or Horlicks or Bournvita?" asked Patti bustling into the room.

"Nothing now, Patti. My friend is coming over. And I am not feeling hungry."

"How can that be?" demanded Patti. "You ate at 2 o'clock. That is almost three hours ago. You must have something now. It is not good for the stomach to keep it empty like this."

"I don't..." began Nalini, but seeing a determined glint in Patti's eye, she subsided into silence. She had had many a battle over this with her mother. Amma used to cajole and threaten her alternatively to drink milk regularly in the evenings but met with limited success. Yet, though faced with a barrage of arguments and sulks, the battle was by no means over. However, Arun posed no problems in matters of food and drink.

Where Nalini was fussy and inclined to pick at her food, Arun always displayed a healthy appetite for anything and everything.

'I will give in just this once,' thought Nalini now. 'I am not going to let Patti think that she can make me drink milk everyday.'
The doorbell rang just then and Nalini ran to answer it. She was disappointed to see Mrs. Anand instead of Aditi.

"Hello, beta. Is your grandmother there?" gushed the lady. "I saw her arrive this morning but I didn't have the time to come earlier."

"Yes, Aunty," said Nalini politely. "Please come in."

Patti stood in the drawing-room, staring at the visitor with frank interest.

"Who is this, Nalini?" she asked, plunging the girl into acute embarrassment. She managed to introduce the two and then escaped to the confines of the kitchen. Really! What did Patti mean by asking about Anand aunty to her face? However, when she emerged some time later, the duo seemed to be getting along very well.

"You must be so glad to have your nani here, Nalini," beamed Mrs. Anand. "Now you won't even miss your mother."

'Grown-ups are really odd,' thought Nalini. 'How can they say things like that without thinking?' Before she could reply, Patti said, "What is nani?"

"Oh, that is what we call the mother's mother," exclaimed Mrs. Anand, looking a little puzzled. "Doesn't Nalini call you that?"

"No, Aunty," said Nalini a trifle irritated. "We call her Patti, meaning 'granny' in Tamil."

"Really? Patti, is that so?" Mrs. Anand looked very surprised but Nalini was used to this. The lady believed the wildest things about South Indians. She did not know about there being four separate cultures with their
distinct languages, and often cheerfully assumed that since the Ramanujans knew Tamil, they knew Malayalam as well. And no amount of correcting made the slightest difference! She left soon after and Arun announced his intention of going to the park.

"Wait, Nalini will take you there," said Patti.

"Me?" exclaimed Nalini. "Why should I, Patti? He always goes alone. The park is just down the road."

"Are you sure?" said Patti doubtfully. "All right, Arun. Be careful and come back in an hour."

Arun ran off and the two were left alone, Patti took Nalini into the study that had been converted into her bedroom. Two trunks were lying there, one of which Patti unlocked and laid open. She took out a package lying on the pile of neatly-folded saris.

"Here, Nalini. This is for you," she said.

Nalini took it wondering what it was and suddenly felt shy. "Thanks, Patti," she murmured, fumbling with the wrapping. Patti must have seen the look of surprise and uncertainty on her face when she opened it.

"It is a pauadai," she said, patting the folds of dark blue silk. "Girls in Chennai wear it." Nalini knew what a pauadai was—a long skirt-like dress that was often worn with a matching top. However, she had never worn one in her life and felt sure that she would look silly if she did.

"I will keep it away," she mumbled and ran to her room. While she was stuffing it away in her cupboard, Aditi called to say she could not come. Some visitors had arrived all of a sudden, and she had to stay and entertain them.
"I wish you could come," grumbled Nalini. "I am terribly bored."

"Why? Aren't you chatting with your grandmother?" asked Aditi. "Did you like her?"

"Yes, yes," said Nalini at once but something in her voice and the swiftness of her reply made Aditi frown.

Nalini frowned too as she replaced the receiver. How could she explain that Patti was not like the normal, non-interfering, placid grandmother? She was alert, aware, curious about their lives and determined to voice her opinions. And Nalini was not sure she liked that at all.
An Outing

Life settled down into a kind of routine thereafter. Nalini would get up in the mornings to find that Patti had already bathed and dressed and was busy cooking in the kitchen. Nalini’s milk and toast were kept ready for her on the table. They had had quite a problem teaching Patti the intricacies of their old toaster. She had insisted on learning despite all Appa’s cautions, and for the first few days they had all sorts of offerings from the temperamental electric gadget—burnt toast, underdone toast and so on. However, she had soon learned to handle it well and there were no problems thereafter.

Patti had suggested to Nalini that she took curds and rice to school instead of the usual sandwich.

"It will be nice and cooling in the hot weather. And it is more filling than bread," she told her. Nalini almost had a fit. What would the others say if she carried such a tiffin to school? Richa and the others would not stop laughing if they got to know!

"No, Patti," she had said firmly. "It is quicker to eat a sandwich. We only have a ten-minute break."

"These schools are mad," muttered Patti. "Only ten minutes to eat! The children will choke themselves."

"Oh, they are used to it," laughed Mr. Ramanujan. "These kids can demolish everything in two minutes."

"I will never understand these things," Patti shook her head. "Look at the time their school starts. By 7 o’clock they are at their bus-stops. In Chennai, most schools start late and finish by four. So the children
can get up leisurely. Not like here—rush, rush, rush, all the time!"

"Wait till winter, Patti," piped in Arun excitedly. "Then it is all fog in the morning and we can't even see the bus coming."

"Really?" Patti shook her head again. "What a place is this!"

When Nalini returned from school, Patti was waiting to serve her lunch. She would ask her things about school, and even if Nalini was bursting with news of any kind, she somehow never felt like telling it to Patti. She did not notice the disappointed look in the old lady's eyes during these sessions. However, Arun more than made up for Nalini's silences. He would give a running commentary of the day's events right from the gate and Patti knew all his friends and activities.

"And what did Shankar do today?" she would ask.

And Arun would chatter to her eagerly. Nalini sometimes envied their friendly talk and banter. Once she lingered in the hall listening to one of Patti's interminable stories while Arun lay in her lap. Patti stopped the tale in the middle and told Arun, "Go, call your sister too."

Arun screamed with laughter. "She won't come, Patti. She's a big grouch."

Nalini was furious at this remark and went off to her room. Part of her anger was in knowing that Arun was right. All she ever did was snap at him and shout. Arun was so impossible at times! What could anyone do with him?

Evenings were spent doing the day's homework and
chatting with Aditi. Much to Nalini’s chagrin, Patti had introduced a strict milk regimen in the house. Nalini had protested and argued and, in desperation, had even gone to her father about it.

"Don't talk like a kid, Nalini," he had said firmly. "Really! You sound like Arun at times! Drinking milk twice a day is good for you. You are much too thin for your age. What Patti says is right."

"But Amma never forced me to," protested Nalini, feeling very resentful. "I feel sick when I drink milk in the evening. Once a day is bad enough and..."

"That is nonsense," interrupted Appa. "Patti has already asked me about it and I agreed with her."

Nalini had turned away angrily. So Patti had told tales behind her back, as if she was a naughty kid like Arun. It was too bad! And so, Nalini drank milk every evening with Arun and under Patti’s eagle gaze. Needless to say, this did not endear Patti to her in any way.

Aditi and her mother had come to see them one evening and the visit had gone off very well. Patti had plied them with a series of homemade sweets, and soon she and Malik aunty were absorbed in a discussion on the recipe of a particular dish.

"She is cute," murmured Aditi to Nalini. "I thought she would be scary looking from all that you said. On the contrary, she is nice and cuddly like my dadi."

"Well, I have not exactly cuddled her like Arun does," giggled Nalini. "You say the craziest things, Aditi!"

"I mean it, Nalini," said Aditi. "And you know something? She looks just like your mother or is it the other way round?"
"I know that," replied Nalini. She too had noticed the resemblance—in the wide smile, the pointed chin and the straight nose.

"You look like her too," went on Aditi. "You all have the same nose."

"Do I?" Nalini fingered her nose in surprise. She had never noticed this before.

When they stood up to leave, Patti looked at Aditi and said, "Why don't you grow your hair like Nalini? Short hair does not suit girls."

Nalini was overcome with embarrassment and annoyance. "Most girls here have short hair, Patti..." she began.

"I think she is right about me," said Aditi surprisingly and Nalini stared at her in vexation. "I have always wanted long hair. I know this silly ponytail doesn't suit me. Short hair looks nice on someone like Richa, but not me."

"I think you look just fine," said Nalini gruffly. "In fact I have been thinking of cutting my hair. It is a nuisance."

"I will never let you do it," said Patti firmly.

"It is my hair," retorted, Nalini stung. "I will do what I like with it."

Mrs. Malik had reached the door by then and did not hear this remark. But Aditi, seeing the hurt look in the old lady's eyes, caught hold of Nalini's hand. "Don't say things like that!" she said in a low tone. "It is rude."

"Well, what does she mean by that?" hissed Nalini. "How can she tell me what I can or cannot do!"

After they left, Nalini went off to her room in a huff. Of course she would never cut her beautiful long hair.
She had just said that to offset Patti’s remarks. And now, Patti would be upset by her retort. Oh dear! Life was really difficult!

As the days went by, Nalini learnt a lot about Patti from the conversations she had with Appa. The table was laid for dinner as soon as Appa returned, and he and Patti would exchange news about relatives and other happenings. Often the discussions would spill over after dinner and they would talk in the drawing-room till Patti felt sleepy and retired for the night. Nalini would watch the news on T.V. with Appa while Arun would play or draw. However, Patti had put a stop to their watching T.V. during dinner.

"You cannot digest your food unless you concentrate on it," she had said firmly.

"But we like to watch cartoons while we eat. We always do," protested Nalini. This was the only issue on which she saw eye-to-eye with Arun.

"You can watch later," Patti was unmoved. "When do you get the time to talk to your father then?"

As always Nalini resented this fresh injunction but Arun, surprisingly, was quite equable. He would ask Patti questions like, "Was Amma naughty like me?" or "Did Amma always do her homework?" and Patti would launch into some tale of the past. Nalini was interested despite herself and was quite thrilled to know that Amma had been a mischievous little imp and a fairly cheeky one at that!

"Just like you," Patti told Arun.

"Like me," he said delightedly. "Yes! Yes! Yes! Not like Nalini, like me!"
"Oh, Nalini is quite like her mother too," said Patti unexpectedly. "She..."

Arun did not want to hear about Nalini. "Tell me more about Amma as a baby," he demanded and Patti would oblige.

Nalini learnt from a chance remark by her father, that Patti's only brother had moved to Australia long ago and that, apart from an old faithful servant there was no one else to bother about her. She knew that her grandfather had died when Amma was two years old, so Patti had obviously lived a fairly lonely life. But there was no sign of it now in the animated chatter about cousins, nieces, friends and so on.

"I don't know any of these people you talk about," Nalini ventured rather self-consciously one day.

Patti looked up eagerly. "Nalini, you must come to Chennai," she said. "I will take you around and show you all these people. After all, they are your relatives and you should know them."

"That is the worst part of living away from our people," said Appa ruefully. "Our children grow up hardly knowing their family. What to do? We have settled down in Delhi."

"And we love it here," put in Nalini sharply, alarmed at the wistful tone in Appa's voice.

"Of course, you do," said Patti immediately. "That is only natural. You were born here. You hardly speak in Tamil, I have noticed."

"We do," said Nalini at once, though she realized with a guilty start that her parents spoke in Tamil, while Arun and she usually conversed in English. She
understood Tamil well but was too diffident to use it.

"You should not forget it, that is all," said Patti quite mildly, but Appa sat up eagerly.

"Amma, now that you are here, I think you should teach them Tamil," he said.

"I don't have the time." put in Nalini, a trifle sulkily.
"There is so much to study and..."

"I will!" shouted Arun suddenly. "And I will teach Patti Hindi. Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Everyone laughed but Nalini felt jealous of Arun. As usual she had appeared in a bad light before Patti.

A welcome diversion was created some days later by Mrs. Rao in school. Running her eye down the length of the class, she said, "Nalini, Richa, Sumita, Anu and Renuka—please meet me after the class in the staffroom."

The girls wondered what Mrs. Rao wanted of them and Sumita, who had a fairly uneasy conscience owing to being one of a wild group, felt uneasy. When class was over they scampered over to the staffroom, more like a bunch of excited juniors than dignified seniors of the school. Mrs. Rao did not keep them in suspense for long.

"Girls, I want you to conduct the prayer service next week. Choose a topic and remember it has to go on for at least five minutes. When you finalize everything, come to me and we will go over it together."

The girls, one and all, were thrilled to be selected for this task. Prayer services were a regular feature during the Monday morning assembly and a different class handled it each time. They usually ended with a
song related to the theme. It was a great honour to be asked to conduct it, and Nalini and Richa sank their differences for once and discussed probable topics animatedly at break-time.

"I wonder why Mrs. Rao selected us," said Sumita for the hundredth time.

"Don't fish for compliments!" retorted Anu. "We are all good in English and you know it."

Sumita grinned happily.

Nalini was bursting with the news when she reached home that day and for once, she told it all to Patti. "We are to write it out tomorrow," said Nalini excitedly. "It is on honesty in our daily life. But we haven't chosen the hymn yet."

"Is a hymn like a bhajan?" Patti wanted to know.

"Sort of," Nalini was unsure.

"That is good," said Patti approvingly. "It is nice to know that children pray nowadays. I thought all they did was play and watch T.V."

Nalini felt impatient all of a sudden. Here she was discussing the service and Patti had gone off at a tangent. She wished Amma were here. She would have given Nalini some useful tips.

As if on cue, the phone rang. Before Patti could answer it, Arun skipped over and picked up the receiver. His excited shrieks brought Nalini over to his side.

"Give it to me," she said. "I want to tell Amma something."

"Oh, is it Leela?" Patti sounded very pleased. "I want to talk to her."

Nalini waited in a fever of impatience for her turn. It
took twice as long as usual, for Patti could not hear properly and Amma obviously had to repeat every sentence. Then at last, she was talking to Amma and telling her the news.

"That is great!" said Amma. "I am so proud of you."

"Will you pray for me?" asked Nalini eagerly. She always begged Amma to pray for her whenever something important was on so that it would go well.

Amma laughed. "Of course, I will. You will speak very well. Don't worry about a thing. But why don't you ask Patti to pray for you now that she is there?"

"Uh-huh," Nalini sounded vague and abruptly changed the topic of conversation. It was good to know that Amma had settled down so well. She had a tiny apartment of her own with a television and a phone, and she called home several times a week. She had started working on her project and liked the system and her colleagues. However, she was missing her family very much.

When Appa returned that evening, he was sorry to have missed her call.

"Amma usually calls in the evening or at night," he observed. "Why did she call in the afternoon?"

"Oh, she had brought home some work..." began Patti but Nalini interrupted her.

"No, Appa. She guessed about the service and that is why she called."

"Really! Is that so?" Appa grinned at his excited daughter. "Well, your mother is a magician then!"

Arun was shocked to hear this. "I didn't know that," he complained. "Why didn't anyone tell me? Can she
do tricks and things?" Everyone roared with laughter and he looked very angry. "You are always laughing at me," he said accusingly. "Now I feel very sad."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Appa. "We can't have that. Come, we will go out for a drive and have ice-creams to make up for it."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" cried Arun and ran to pin on his shoes.

"Is there any temple nearby?" asked Patti eagerly. "It is long since I have been to one."

"Of course. There is a Ganesha temple about fifteen minutes drive from here. We will go there."

"And the ice-creams?" asked Nalini, disappointed. She was not very particular about the temple, though she had gone there twice with Amma and had liked the prasad they gave. It was hot, sweet rice or shakarepongal, served in a banana leaf container. Amma often made the same sweet at home. Somehow, it had tasted sweeter and richer at the temple.

"We will have ice-creams on the way back," said Appa. Then, teasingly added, "That is, if you really want them."

"Of course, we do, Appa," chanted Nalini and Arun.

"Nalini, why don't you wear the pauadai I gave you?" asked Patti. "You haven't worn it even once. This is a good occasion."

Before Nalini could respond, Appa chimed in. "That is a good idea. I would like to see you in a pauadai, Nalini. Go and change."

"Appa..." began Nalini, but he cut her short by exclaiming at the time. "Hurry up. I want to be back before the news."
Nalini had no option but to change into the pauadai. She wore the dark blue dress with its matching top, but hated the idea of going out on the streets wearing this unfamiliar garment.

'If someone sees me, I will be dead!' she thought, grimacing at her reflection in the mirror.

"Nice!" said Appa as she came before him.

"You are the image of Leela when young!" exclaimed Patti. "I will get you more of these. Much better than those jeans and shorts you always wear."

That spoiled the day for Nalini. Infuriated by Patti's remarks, she stepped out on the road where Appa and Arun were waiting in the car.

It was quite nice at the temple, however. There was a cool breeze at the top where the idol was situated and Arun had to be restrained from lying down on the topmost step. Finally, Patti took him around to see the other idols and told him small stories about each, with the promise of elaborating on them when they got home.

Arun counted on his fingers. "You have to tell me five stories," he said. "I won't go to sleep till you tell me all."

"Yes, yes, Arun," said Patti soothingly. "I won't leave out any."

Here in the temple, no one stared at Nalini and she relaxed little by little. She shook out the folds of the pauadai and listened in delight to the swishing, rustling sound of the cloth. It felt nice. Perhaps she could wear it to the temple again. She crunched the sugar cubes they had been given and watched Patti make numerous
rounds of the idols. Then they were in the car heading towards the ice-cream parlour.

"Will we sit inside?" asked Arun as they drew up before it.

"No," said Appa, "we will just take the ice-creams and eat them in the car. It is too crowded for Patti inside. Nalini, come with me."

"A chocolate chip, remember!" Arun shouted at their disappearing backs. Nalini, at least paid him no heed. For, right at the entrance to the parlour near the revolving door, stood Richa, Shalini and one other girl. And they were staring at Nalini with wide-open eyes.
The Prayer Service

"What are you wearing, Nalini?" Richa asked with the greatest interest.

"It is...it is called a pauadai," said Nalini, biting her lips and looking defiant.

"Really? A pau...pauadai," Richa stumbled over the word and Nalini had the feeling she was doing it deliberately.

"It is very pretty," said Shalini and broke into giggles. The other girls grinned too and they both looked at Richa.

"Wish I had one like this," Richa was saying in a wistful tone. "All I have are salwar kameezes and jeans and skirts. So boring, isn't it?"

"Very," said Nalini shortly and followed her father inside. She was convinced that Richa and the others were mocking her.

They had gone by the time she and her father came out with the ice-creams, but Nalini's appetite had gone. The pauadai that had seemed so beautiful in the temple now flapped awkwardly against her ankles, and she felt ridiculous in her strange attire. Richa would surely spread the word in the class.

Arun screamed with pleasure at his chocolate ice-cream and jumped up and down.

"Careful!" warned Appa. "I don't want any ice-cream on the seats. You too, Nalini."

A wave of resentment coursed through Nalini. Why was Appa treating her like a silly kid who could not manage an ice-cream? She bit large chunks out of the
cone, unmindful of its lovely vanilla flavour. She glanced at Patti who was placidly spooning her pineapple ice-cream out of a cup. All of a sudden, Nalini felt very angry with Patti.

'I hate her!' she thought. 'It is all her fault that this happened. Bringing that pauadai all the way and forcing me to wear it. I have never been so embarrassed in my life. It is just too much!' Patti looked up just then and caught Nalini's eye. She wondered why Nalini looked so furious.

The following day, rehearsals for the prayer service were started in right earnest. The song was selected after much agonized discussion and the parts were given out. Nalini had a long speech to make and was very keen to get it right.

"Stop being so nervous," Mrs. Rao admonished her several times. "If you are tense, things are bound to go wrong. And anyway, you see these girls everyday. What is there to worry about?"

She turned her attention to Richa. That girl's problem was her over-confidence. She had as long a speech as Nalini's but was so cocksure about it that Mrs. Rao was inclined to be worried.

"Learn your lines properly, Richa," she said many times. "You can't make up your own words to fit the speech. They don't sound right."

Richa, annoyed at being pulled up before the others, said nothing.

"How is it going?" Meghna asked her later.

"Oh, great!" Richa answered airily. "I can't wait till Monday. Sumita is a bit shaky though and Nalini
sometimes speaks so fast that you just can’t understand what she is saying.”

“Really?” Meghna laughed. “Well, I am glad I am not in your shoes. Imagine standing before the entire school and the staff and the Principal and everyone. It would make my head swim!”

Someone else’s head was swimming at the prospect, had Meghna but known it. As Monday morning drew nearer, Nalini found herself getting increasingly anxious about the prayer service.

“Suppose I stammer or choke or something like that?” she asked Aditi.

“You won’t” Aditi reassured her.

“What if I do?” persisted Nalini. “We can’t have our papers with us. And if I forget my speech? I can’t bear to be laughed at!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” laughed Aditi. “Come on, Nalini, you are the best in our class. If you don’t do a great job, who will? That is the reason why you were selected, silly!”

“That is what makes it worse,” said Nalini slowly. “When people expect you to do well, it always makes things more difficult.” Then she grumbled, “Wish I were taller. What if I can’t reach the mike?”

“It can be adjusted,” said Aditi. “Now stop worrying and let us talk about other things.”

On Sunday night, Nalini polished her shoes till they shone and checked her ribbons and the House badge a hundred times. She practised her speech before the mirror but before she was midway through it, she saw Arun peering around the door.
"Go away!" she said fiercely. "Don't disturb me now."

"Can't I come in and hear it properly?" asked the little boy longingly. "You looked so funny with your face all serious and talking to the mirror."

"Get out!" shouted Nalini and took a threatening step towards the door. Arun shrieked in alarm and was gone. Nalini settled herself into bed, trying not to think of the morrow.

When she awoke the following morning, she remembered it was Monday and her heart sank. All of a sudden, she wished she did not have to take part in the Service. She got out of the bed reluctantly and set about getting ready.

"Nalini, come and have your toast and milk," called out Patti. "Isn't it late for you?"

The very sight of the food on the table made Nalini's stomach turn. She suddenly felt sick.

"I can't eat anything, Patti," she said.

Patti took one look at her wan face and said firmly, "Don't be silly, child. You can't go to school on an empty stomach."

Nalini flushed with anger. "I am telling you I can't eat," she said stubbornly. "I feel sick."

"Then you should stay at home," said Patti at once. "Your father left early for a meeting but you can ring him up and tell him later. Now go and lie down."

"I can't!" exclaimed Nalini, angry tears filling her eyes. "Today is the Prayer Service."

"Oh, yes," said Patti slowly. "But just because of the Service, you cannot starve. Either you eat or you stay at home."
Two faces looked at each other—one angry and obstinate, the other calm but determined. Nalini had no option but to choke down her toast and swallow the milk.

"Don't eat like that or you will get a stomachache," Patti said as she disappeared into the kitchen. Nalini finished her breakfast in angry silence and snatching up her bag, ran to the bus-stop without bothering to say goodbye. The bus was coming round the corner and Aditi looked anxious.

"Nalini, I thought you were not coming," she said. "Got up late?"

"No," Nalini replied brusquely. "Some problem with Patti." She had a stitch on her side with the running and felt somewhat uneasy. Aditi, thinking she was worried about the Service, left her to herself.

When they reached school, Nalini gave her bag to Aditi and went to the staffroom to meet the others, as had been arranged. Mrs. Rao was there, giving last-minute instructions to Richa, Renuka and Anu. She sighed with relief when she saw Nalini.

"There you are. Now god knows where Sumita is."

"Her bus comes in late sometimes," said Renuka. "Though she said her father would drop her today."

"Well, there is hardly any time left," Mrs. Rao said reasonably and then, catching sight of Nalini's face, exclaimed in surprise. "What is wrong, Nalini? Are you feeling ill?"

Nalini, who had been trying to fight the sickness in her throat, nodded miserably.

"Oh, dear! Of all things to happen now," lamented
the teacher. "Well, we can't let you go on stage like this. You better go to the Sick Room." She turned around to the others just as Sumita came running up. "Who can take Nalini's part?"

"I can," Richa sounded confident as usual. "I will do it, ma'am. I know the words."

"Are you sure?" Mrs. Rao sounded doubtful.

In answer, Richa rattled off the first few lines of Nalini's speech and the teacher's face cleared.

"All right, you will do. Now, girls, form a line and let us go to the Hall. Quickly."

Nalini went off to the Sick Room where she promptly threw up and the nurse gave her some medicine.

Once the sickness left her, the feeling of disappointment settled and it was all she could do to stop herself from howling like a baby. To think that Richa, of all people, was to take her part! It was too bad!

The nurse allowed her to attend classes after break-time. She was greeted with vociferous inquiries by her friends. Even Richa asked her how she was feeling and for some reason, that brought tears to her eyes. "Was the Service good?" she asked Aditi later.

"Oh, yes, Nalini. Richa read your part and Sumita stammered a bit but it was all right."

Mrs. Rao had a kind word for her too. "I am sorry you missed your chance," she said. "Better luck next time. You shouldn't have come to school, if you were feeling sick."

Poor Nalini nodded her head. By the time she reached home, she had reached a point of simmering rage towards Patti. As it happened, Mrs. Anand was
there and Nalini managed to eat some mouthfuls and then shut herself up in her room. She fell asleep almost at once and awoke much later when there was a tap on her door.

"Sleeping?" asked Appa. "I came home early today for a change. So how was the Prayer Service?"

Nalini poured out the whole story to Appa, taking care to lower her voice so that Patti or Arun would not come in.

"It is all Patti's fault!" she wound up furiously. "If she hadn't forced me to eat, I would have been fine. I will never forgive her for this!"

To her surprise and chagrin, Appa looked annoyed. "Don't talk like that!" he said sternly. "You have only yourself to blame if you felt sick. Patti was quite right to insist on your having breakfast. You can't skip your food every time there is something on. All right, you felt nervous, but starving would only have made it worse. You are a smart, intelligent girl and it is high time you stopped this childish habit. You threw up because you wolfed down your food and then ran to the bus-stop. Patti has nothing to do with it." Nalini was speechless with hurt and anger. Even Appa had taken Patti's side!

"I wish... I wish Amma were here," she said, feeling very sorry for herself. It was only a month since she had gone away!

There were no more excitements at school until the day of the parents-teachers meeting. There was a collective groan in class when Mrs. Sinha, their class teacher, announced it. As usual, it was to be on a
Saturday morning and woe betide any student who did not inform her parents of the meeting.

"No noise," Mrs. Sinha rapped on the desk. "There is no need for most of you to worry at least not in my subject." Mrs. Sinha taught History and though a great majority cordially detested it, there were some who were so enthused by her teaching that they did extra work in the subject whenever time permitted. It was fun to read the historical novels of Jean Plaidy and Georgette Heyer in the library, and to pore over maps to trace the route of invading armies and battles. Mrs. Sinha had even taken Class IX-A to the museum and the girls had been deeply thrilled to see the old inscriptions and coin collections.

"I think I would like to be an archaeologist," Nalini had confided once to Aditi. "You dig somewhere and unearth a city or a temple or whatever."

"Put on some weight first!" Aditi had laughed. "From what Sinha ma'am says, it is hard work and whoever heard of a fainting archaeologist!"

Mrs. Sinha looked around the class now. "Remember, girls, I want all parents to come. No excuses will be tolerated." She glanced briefly at Sonam and Manisha, and they went red in the face and looked down. They were the acknowledged slackers of the class and no amount of prodding and coaxing could get them to do any work. It was no wonder that they would try to wriggle out of a parents-teachers meeting with some excuse or the other. Their previous teacher had always been taken in by their inventive tales, but Mrs. Sinha was not easily fooled.
At the end of the class, Mrs. Sinha gathered her books and called for silence. "I hope you remember that your exams are round the corner," she said. "Please start working seriously for it. I want good results from this class."

The girls groaned again in unison.

"I would better draw up a timetable," said Nalini eagerly. "That way I can finish the course in time..."

She was interrupted by Aditi’s heavy sigh. "I hate exams," complained that disgruntled soul. "How can you be so enthusiastic about them?"

"Not enthusiastic, but it has got to be done," said Nalini briefly. "I will tell you what. We will study together everyday. That will make things easier and we can sort out our problems and so on."

"All right, genius," said Aditi resignedly. "Whatever you say. I just hope I pass."

But Nalini was brooding over something. "I would like to beat Richa this time," she said. "The only thing is I am sure my maths and science will let me down. She is so good at both. My mother used to help me but now I will have to tackle things alone."

"What about uncle?" queried Aditi.

"Oh, he hardly has any spare time. He only gets Sundays off and then also he is so busy, I can’t squeeze in all my problems in one day!"

"Well, don’t make yourself ill just trying to top," cautioned Aditi. "You always do anyway, so just relax this time."

That evening, Nalini’s father was dismayed to hear about the meeting. "If it is on the 13th, I can’t come,"
he said. "There is an office meeting fixed for the morning and I have to go in early. Can't I meet your teacher any other day?"

"That is not allowed, Appa," objected Nalini. "They are very strict about things like that. Parents just can't barge in any day to meet teachers."

Patti had put aside her Tamil magazine and was listening to them.

"If there is a problem, then I can go to the school," she said.

Nalini looked up, startled. "Oh no..." she began but Appa broke in.

"That would solve everything," he said, relieved. "Why didn't I think of it before? I will drop you two early at the school on my way to office. That way you can finish before the crowd starts."

"Appa..." began Nalini desperately, "why bother Patti? I will ask Malik aunty if she can find out about me and..."

"No, let us not bother her," Appa shook his head decisively. "If Patti can go, then that is ideal. I will write a letter to your teacher explaining why I could not come."

Patti nodded eagerly. "And I will get to see your school, Nalini."

"I want to go too!" shouted Arun. "Appa, may I go with them? Please, Appa."

"No, you won't!" snapped Nalini. "And that is final."

Arun was very disappointed. "You are just jealous," he muttered. "My school is bigger than yours. That is why you don't want me to come."
"We will leave Arun with Muniamma for a few hours," said Appa. "She can go home when you return from school."

The more Nalini thought about it, the more appalled she was at the thought of Patti accompanying her.

What would her teachers say when they saw her in her madusar? And Patti did not even know Hindi. How would she talk to Mrs. Sharma, the Hindi teacher? Would she demand to be introduced to everyone in her usual blunt way? What would her classmates say?

For a wild moment, Nalini even considered telling Mrs. Sinha that her father was ill and there was no one else to come on her behalf. But Appa would want to know if his letter to the teacher had been delivered. And what if Aditi got to know about this mysterious illness? Nalini shook her head sadly. She would have to go with Patti to the meeting. There was no other alternative.
Parents-Teachers Meeting

On the morning of the parents-teachers meeting, Muniamma and Patti had a squabble. As Nalini was getting ready, she heard raised sounds from the kitchen and hastened to see what the matter was. Muniamma was standing to one side, a defiant look on her face, while Patti scolded her.

"...Don’t do any work," Patti was saying. "You have been spoilt and have become lazy. Why are the dishes not washed and...?"

Appa came running, his tie askew and his hair ruffled.

"What is the matter, Amma?" he cried.

"It is this lazy girl," replied Patti. "The kitchen should be clean before I enter it and she has not done it."

Nalini returned to her room, feeling strangely indignant. She had heard Amma scolding Muniamma several times for her shoddy work, but somehow that was Amma’s right, not Patti’s. Patti was like a guest in their house and guests were not supposed to scold servants! Nalini fumed for a while and then realized that it was getting late. Appa was shouting for her impatiently and she ran to the door after a final glance in the mirror.

Patti was waiting in what appeared to be her best nine-yards sari—maroon with a gold zari border. Her bun looked neater and more severe than usual, and she had a big brown handbag that Nalini had never seen before.

Arun was admonished to behave himself and he scowled at them all as they got into the car. Appa drove
like the wind but, not far from the school, they were caught in a traffic jam.

"What bad luck!" exclaimed Appa, fidgeting and looking at his watch. "It is really late and this shows no signs of clearing.

"Appa," Nalini said suddenly, "Patti and I will get off here and walk down. It is just five minutes to school from here."

"Are you sure?" Appa asked doubtfully. "Then I will reverse into this side road and take the main road from there."

"No problem, Appa," Nalini opened the car door and stepped onto the pavement. Patti followed her.

"Bye, and give my letter to your teacher," called out Appa.

Nalini and Patti walked on past the long line of cars. There were bound to be some familiar faces in them but Nalini avoided looking in that direction. She was walking faster than usual but did not realize it until Patti stumbled on a loose stone and almost fell. Nalini caught her hand and steadied her. To her surprise and dismay, the door of the car near them opened and Meghna peeped out.

"Hey, Nalini! Get in our car," she said. "The jam is just clearing."

"No, thanks," began Nalini politely when Patti said, "Come on, Nalini, I would rather sit in a car than walk on this rough road."

Nalini had no choice but to follow Patti into the car. She wished Meghna's mother and a round of introductions followed.
Meghna was looking with great curiosity at Patti while her mother was exclaiming over her sari.

"So beautiful, typical Kanjeevaram. There is nothing better than them!"

Patti beamed proudly but just then the cars moved ahead and the school came in sight.

"Such a big school!" cried Patti. "Nalini, how do you all find your way around?"

Nalini, feeling embarrassed and proud at the same time, assured Patti that it was no problem at all. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Meghna grinning and knew she had stored up that remark to tell her friends. Once at school, the two families parted ways as Meghna’s younger sister wanted to see her teachers first. Nalini led Patti down the long line of corridors, past the three science labs and the library, past the playground and hockey field to the senior block of classrooms. There were not too many people about. The crowd would obviously come later, as Appa had predicted.

Nalini took Patti to see Mrs. Rao first as she wanted her to start with a good impression of her work. Mrs. Rao praised Nalini, as the latter had known she would, and even discussed the reason for Patti being in Delhi.

"Nalini never told me all this," she said accusingly. "It must be great for you to have your grandmother here, isn’t it, Nalini?"

Nalini went red and mumbled something. Then Patti said, "Oh, she misses her mother like anything. She wants her back fast."
Nalini was taken aback by this remark. How had Patti known exactly what she felt? She always seemed to pay more attention to Arun and his wants, after all.

The round of the teachers finished faster than Nalini expected. Patti had managed very well and Nalini felt greatly relieved. Except for the science and maths teachers who felt that she could do better, every other teacher had praised her. The session with Mrs. Sharma had not posed as much of a problem as Nalini had anticipated. One look at Patti and Mrs. Sharma had switched to fluent English. This had been something of a shock to Nalini, for Mrs. Sharma had never spoken to them in any other language but Hindi, and English was never used in her classes.

"Usually girls who don't have Hindi as their mother tongue find it a problem," Mrs. Sharma told Patti, "Nalini is well above the standard of the class."

"That is good," said Patti. "Not knowing the language, I cannot say much about it."

"Perhaps Nalini can teach you," Mrs. Sharma's eyes twinkled. "It is not as difficult as it seems."

"Oh, I am too old to start learning anything new," Patti smiled ruefully. "However, Nalini's brother has promised to teach me."

For some reason, Nalini felt a tiny stab of jealousy when Patti said this. A group of girls and their parents arrived just then, so they had to leave.

"Who is left?" Patti asked as they left the classroom.

"No one, Patti. We will go home now."

They made their way down the staircase. Patti drew many curious looks from the swelling throng of people.
It was not a common sight to see an old lady attired thus, walking confidently through the school corridors. Just as they left the senior block and were about to cross over to the office area, Nalini, hearing laughter and raised voices, looked up and saw Richa, Shalini and some others coming towards them from a distance. It was the decision of a second. Nalini pulled Patti behind the swings, out of sight of the girls and cut across the playground towards the back gate. As she expected, the way was deserted and they encountered no one.

"We did not come this way," objected Patti. "Where are you taking me?"

"Out, Patti," Nalini said swiftly, "we can go out through many gates. I wanted to...to show you the back gate."

"Oh," said Patti. She seemed satisfied with the explanation but Nalini, glancing at her face, saw a thoughtful look on it. All at once, she felt very petty as if she had cheated Patti somehow. Angry with herself for feeling this way, she stalked out of the school to the auto-stand on the opposite side of the road.

Appa had given her money for the return journey, with instructions to be very careful. They sat in silence in the auto for a while. Then Patti said, "Autos in Chennai are much wider and the engine is less noisy."

Nalini nodded and stared out at the road, wishing that the guilty feeling would go away.

"Why did you not ask Aditi to go with us?" Patti asked after a while.

"Oh, her father said he would go from the office," said Nalini. "Her mother was not feeling well. She has caught a cold."
"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Patti. "I would have made her my ginger and tulsi mixture. It is an excellent remedy for colds."

"What is wrong with coldarin and vicks cough drops?" demanded Nalini, feeling faintly irritated. "This is what people use nowadays."

"They might," said Patti, shaking her head, "but there is nothing better than ginger and tulsi for a cold. Let us go to their house today. I will make the mixture when we get home."

"Aditi is coming over today. You can give it to her then," said Nalini rather ungraciously. She felt quite bad as soon as she said it and sighed in annoyance. There was something about Patti that brought out the prickly side in her!

Back home, Arun was inclined to be querulous. "Muniamma didn't play with me," he complained.

"I did play!" exclaimed Muniamma indignantly. "I played till I felt tired and he was very angry with me."

"Come, I will show you a new game, Arun. Don't trouble Muniamma. She has to go home now." Patti sounded mild, so the quarrel of the morning was obviously forgiven and forgotten. Muniamma looked relieved and went to collect her bag. Patti took Arun to her room and took a wooden board out from under the bed. "Get me a chalk-piece," she told him.

Arun ran out excitedly, shouting for Nalini. He had seen her use a chalk-piece sometimes to whiten her P.T. shoes when the cleaner had finished.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Nalini interestedly.
"A game!" shouted Arun. "Patti is showing me a new game. Yes! Yes! Yes!" Then he added, "It is for small people, only for me, because you left me alone."

"Well, go and play your stupid game then," Nalini threw the chalk-piece at Arun and flounced away. Silly Arun and his silly games! She had better things to do.

They were playing the game for the hundredth time when Appa came home from the office.

"Look, Appa!" cried Arun in the greatest excitement. "I have the lions and Patti has the goats and I am going to eat up the goats!"

Appa peered at the board, at the square within a triangle on which some tamarind seeds had been placed. "I used to play this when I was small," he smiled. "I had forgotten all about it." Then he looked at Nalini. "First, let me hear how many scoldings Nalini got from her teachers today."

"None," said Patti immediately. "She has been doing very well in class—that is what all the teachers say."

"That is good," Appa sounded very pleased. "What about maths and science?"

Patti looked at Nalini and smiled. "Oh, she is going to do as well in them as in the others. Right, Nalini?"

Nalini was amazed. Was not Patti going to tell Appa what Mrs. Mehra had said that Nalini did not pay as much attention to her science subjects as she did to the others? Before she could stop herself, she flashed a grateful smile at Patti. There and then, she made up her mind. She was going to work so hard in science and maths, that her teachers would be stunned. And Richa would be left far behind. She had been neglecting
these subjects, but now she would make up for everything.

Lost in her daydreams, she was quite startled when the doorbell rang. It was Aditi, and the two girls went into Nalini’s room and shut the door. They were busy exchanging accounts of the day when Aditi said, “My father said he saw you coming out of the senior block. He was about to call out when all of a sudden you disappeared with Patti behind the swings. Where were you going?”

Nalini felt her cheeks burning. “I was...just showing Patti the back exit,” she said.

“Why?” Aditi sounded incredulous. “There is nothing there except the bookshop. Didn’t you show her the labs and the library?”

“I did,” Nalini said impatiently, ”...it was just that there was a crowd in front and I wanted to avoid it.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Aditi said, ”I suppose Richa and the others were in that crowd.” As Nalini nodded reluctantly, she went on, “You are the limit, Nalini! You didn’t want them to see your grandmother, so you went out from the back exit. Are you crazy or something?”

Nalini stared at her friend in angry surprise but for once, Aditi was jolted out of her usual calm.

“What are you ashamed of?” she went on. “You don’t want them to see your grandmother, you didn’t want them to see you in that pauadai or whatever. For heaven’s sake, does it matter so much what you wear? I am not ashamed of being a Punjabi, so why are you ashamed of being a Tamilian? If my mother can wear
a salwar kameez and feel proud, why can't you or your grandmother wear your own dress?"

"Of course, I am proud of being a Tamilian," Nalini retorted, stung. "I am not ashamed of anything. It is mean of you to say things like that!"

A heavy silence hung in the room, broken at last by Aditi. She never remained angry for long and now she looked a little stricken.

"I am really sorry I said all that," she ventured. "I didn't mean it. Are we friends again?"

"All right," Nalini replied sullenly. Aditi left soon after, declaring she had some work to do at home. Later, Patti said, "Why didn't you tell me Aditi was leaving? I would have asked her to wait while I made that mixture for her mother."

"She had to go in a hurry," said Nalini shortly. She picked up a book and tried to engross herself in it. It was an Agatha Christie that was thrilling enough, but she felt her mind wandering. There was silence in the house. Patti had retired to her room to write out 'Sri Ramajayam' a hundred times in her notebook—a daily ritual. Arun was perched on the dining-table, colouring a picture. Nalini snuggled up to Appa who was reading a newspaper on the sofa.

"What is it, Nalini?" he smiled.

"Appa, I want to ask you something. You must promise not to laugh."

"I won't," said Appa looking at Nalini's face and wondering what the matter was.

"Appa, why did you come to Delhi?" Nalini asked solemnly.
"I got a job here," said Appa, "so I came. Then Amma found herself a job too, so we decided to settle down here. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered..." said Nalini, flushing a little and thinking that her question sounded very silly, "whether, in the beginning, you felt out of place and people knew you were not from here and whether that made a difference and..."

Appa did not laugh but seemed to understand what Nalini was trying to say.

"What matters is that you do your work well and keep an open mind. You should have confidence in yourself at all times. And if you make good friends that makes all the difference. It does not matter where you are from or where they are from. Of course, there are bound to be differences if you come from various parts of India, but you should be proud of yourself and who you are and respect others as well."

Appa rarely lectured Nalini on anything and she felt a little shy. Should she tell Appa that at times she was terribly proud of being a Tamilian, and at times she felt a little embarrassed for being different? No, she decided. It was all very confusing, but she would have to sort it out on her own.

'Aditi was right,' she admitted to herself. 'Why make a big deal over what a person wears? In any case, I am not like that silly lot—Richa and her friends—who are obsessed with their clothes and the new fashions and all that.' She thought of Sonam, the only Nepali girl in their class. She never got upset when anyone laughed at her accent and she often wore traditional Nepali
costumes to school functions. 'I am really silly,' thought Nalini. 'Why do I bother so much about what people say or think about me? Richa makes fun of me, whatever I do. We have never got along anyway. I am going to try and be different now like Aditi keeps telling me to be.' It was going to be an uphill task, Nalini knew.

Appa watched Nalini struggling with her thoughts and hoped he had helped, in some way, to settle her doubts. He thought over their discussion and smiled.

'Nalini is really growing up,' he reflected.
Navaratri Festival

The girls were drinking orange squash and munching chocolate biscuits when Patti looked in.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "There has been no sound from this room for hours."

"We are taking a ten-minute break and then we are back to studies," Nalini explained.

"I wouldn't mind if the break was longer," laughed Aditi stretching herself.

Patti said, "Why don't you go out for a walk? It will make you feel fresh. No use sitting cooped up in your room for hours. You will study better when you come back."

"Oh, no!" said Nalini, feeling slightly irritated. "We have so much to do. We can't go for a walk now."

"Why not, Nalini?" interrupted Aditi. "Come on. We have been at it since 4 o'clock. My head is so full of dates and things, I could scream!"

"All right," Nalini shut her books resignedly. "No point in going on if you feel like that. Let us go."

"Why don't you come with us, Patti?" Aditi had started calling her so on Patti's insistence.

Patti looked very pleased. "Should I?" she said. "Maybe I will. It will be a change for me."

Nalini felt a pinprick of jealousy at this. She should have suggested this, not Aditi. It made her feel small. She thought suddenly of Patti spending most evenings at home, while Arun went off to the park and she was off to Aditi's place. Patti had never mentioned feeling bored or lonely, but she must have felt that sometimes.
When they set off down the road, she asked Patti what she did in Chennai in the evenings.

"Nothing much," replied Patti. "My neighbour’s daughter comes to hear stories, but mostly to sit on my big wooden swing. Do you remember it?" Nalini shook her head. "It is as old as your mother," continued Patti. "When she was a little girl, she would read and play and sleep on the swing."

"Off for a walk with your grandmother?" Mrs. Anand suddenly hove into sight. "That is good. Why don’t you bring her over sometimes, Nalini?"

"I will, Aunty," Nalini promised but when the lady had gone, she giggled. "Anand aunty doesn’t wait for anyone to visit her, she goes visiting them instead. She would tell my mother the same thing and whenever she set off to visit them she would meet aunty coming over instead."

The others laughed and it was a very companionable trio that entered the park. Arun came rushing up to them.

"Patti, have you come to take me back?" he cried. "I haven’t finished playing. It is my turn to swing next."

"No, we haven’t come to take you back," assured Patti.

"We came to see if you were behaving yourself," put in Nalini.

"I am behaving myself," said Arun hotly.

"What a change!" remarked Nalini and Arun looked angrier than ever.

"Why do you tease him so much?" Patti intervened. "Go and play, Arun. See, your friends are calling you."

Nalini’s irritation came to the fore again. She hated
being talked to in a dictatorial manner by anyone, little realizing that she often spoke to Arun in the same way.

Aditi led Patti to a bench from where they had a view of the entire park—the swings, the slides, the animal-shaped hedges and the hillocks.

"It is very peaceful here," said Patti. "I wish I had a park like this near my house in Chennai. I would go there everyday."

Nalini felt gratified and quite proud on hearing this. They saw Shalini at a distance and Aditi looked thoughtfully at her friend. However, for the first time since Patti came, Nalini felt no trace of embarrassment or awkwardness. They greeted Shalini genially when she passed them, but did not introduce her to Patti.

"Who is that?" asked Patti. "Does she study with you, Nalini?"

The girls nodded and she said, "Why don’t you call your friends over, Nalini? I would like to meet them. Perhaps after your exams?"

Nalini looked faintly surprised and pleased. She stored it away in her mind as a possible idea.

Exams began the following week. As usual Nalini was tense, but she did not dare to skip her breakfast or her other meals. Not only would her excuses have fallen on unsympathetic ears as before, but she would have invited Appa’s wrath as well. Nalini thought guiltily of the several times she had angered Amma by doing just that. Amma would say angrily, "Well, if you feel faint during your exam, then it is totally your fault," and go off to work. Now with Patti sitting before her and Arun,
as if she had all the time in the world, she had to eat properly. It was hard to do that when a science or a maths exam loomed before her, but she managed it.

"Gosh! What a horrible paper!" Renuka exclaimed after the last exam, which was history. She made a face as if she had a bad taste in her mouth.

Aditi nodded wryly. "I know, it was awful! Sinha ma'am must have been out of her mind when she set the questions!"

Renuka turned accusingly on Nalini. "I suppose you did well as usual," she said enviously. "I saw you writing sheet after sheet."

"Oh, I didn't do all that well," Nalini grimaced. "Some of the questions were really twisted."

"Only some?" Renuka raised her eyes heavenwards and the three of them burst out laughing. Though Nalini and Aditi were the best of friends, Renuka often made a threesome with them. She was an easygoing and very friendly personality, which made it easy for them to like her. She had started off as Richa's friend, since the latter had befriended her when she had joined school, but had moved away from that gang soon after. However, she never bore them any malice or gossiped about them—a fact that often made Richa wish she had kept her as a friend.

"Holidays from tomorrow," Renuka said happily. "I am just going to sleep for ten days."

Nalini had been absorbed in her thoughts. Now she tapped Renuka on the shoulder as that girl swung herself off Aditi's desk.

"I am thinking of calling some friends to my place,"
she said a little nervously. "Will you come, Renuka?"

Renuka's eyes widened and her pleasure showed on her face. She liked Nalini and Aditi and knew they liked her too, but this was the first time they had included her in their plans.

"Of course, I will," she said at once. "When is it? During the holidays?"

"I will decide and give you a call," said Nalini.

"Who else?" Aditi asked curiously when Renuka had gone.

"That is all," Nalini was surprised. "Who else is there to call?"

Aditi looked thoughtful. "Why not call Shalini too?" she asked.

"Are you crazy? Shalini, of all people?" Nalini was very indignant. "You will be saying Richa next!"

"No, of course, not. I won't," laughed Aditi. "It is just that since Shalini lives nearby, I thought this would be a good way to sort things out. If she becomes friendly with us, she won't be giggling in your face all the time."

"Nothing doing," said Nalini emphatically. "I am not desperate to be Shalini's friend. She is not coming and that is final!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Aditi made a mock salute. "You really look mulish when you stick your chin out like that!"

The next morning, Patti took Nalini into her room. Nalini perched on the bed and watched Patti drag out the second of her trunks that had remained unopened until then.

"What is it, Patti?" Nalini asked curiously.

"I want to show you something," said Patti as she
unlocked the box and threw back the lid to reveal small bundles of various shapes and sizes wrapped in pieces of cloth. She took one out and handed it to Nalini. It was a beautiful pink and white porcelain doll with pointed features and a lovely flaring skirt. Nalini cried out in delight at the sight.

“Careful!” cautioned Patti. “It is easily breakable.” She had already unwrapped the male counterpart of the doll, a pair of monkeys on a carved stand, and a porcelain baby.

“What are these?” asked Nalini, picking them up and examining them carefully.

“These are golu dolls,” said Patti and Nalini knew at once what she meant. Amma had told her all about the Navaratri festival of nine days, when people in the South displayed these dolls and figures, and the women visited each other for haldi-kumkum. They had never celebrated it on such a scale at home, but Amma always insisted on doing a Saraswati puja on the last two days of the festival. Nalini and Arun would place their textbooks near the goddess’ image and Amma would ask them to pray for knowledge. However, for Nalini and Arun, the highlight of the October holidays was always the last day, when they would go with Amma and Appa to the nearby community grounds to watch the effigies of Ravana and his brothers being burnt.

“I thought I would ask you if you would like to display these dolls,” Patti was saying. “I have no use for them in Chennai living all alone. Children enjoy all this so I brought them to Delhi for Leela. These have been in the family for generations.”
"Let us do it," said Nalini impulsively and Patti looked very pleased.

When Arun returned from Mrs. Anand’s house, where he had gone to retrieve a ball, he was shown the dolls and warned not to touch them.

"I want to help," he protested, as he watched Nalini and Patti set up a stand of low tables and boards in a corner of the drawing-room.

"You can’t. You will break something," snapped Nalini.

Arun was about to cry when Patti mollified him with a sweet and told him to decide on the placing of the dolls. When Aditi came over the following day, she was thrilled at the sight. Mrs. Anand came over too and admired the four-tier display of dolls wholeheartedly.

"Now you must sing something," said Patti. "That is the rule."

The good-natured Mrs. Anand sang a bhajan promptly, rather tunelessly but heartily. Patti had made some prasad, which she then accepted reverently.

For the next few days, Nalini and Arun were very busy. A profusion of guests, mostly neighbours, who were rounded up by Mrs. Anand, came to their house and it was Arun’s job to give them a drink and the prasad of the day. Patti, looking very important, bustled about explaining things to the guests while Nalini and quite often Aditi too, helped out. It was good to hear their display and the dolls being praised over and over again. Nalini could not help feeling very proud.

Amma had been told all about the happenings and she was very happy about the children.
"I wish I was there," she told Nalini. "I can almost imagine what it is like and what you are all doing." When, at long last, it was time to put away the dolls, Arun was inclined to be tearful.

"Why can’t they be out always?" he protested.

"We will take them out next year," promised Appa. "May I play with them now and then?" pleaded the little boy.

"What for? So that you can break them?" Nalini had bristled, but Appa ruffled Arun’s hair and said, "These are not ordinary playthings. We have to preserve them so that someday, your children and Nalini’s can use them."

This was an entirely new idea for Arun and for a while, he was completely enraptured. Then, to divert Arun’s mind further, Appa talked about the effigy burning they had witnessed. They had watched the action from the car for Patti’s sake, but she had covered her ears firmly when the figures burst to bits.

"There is so much smoke," she had said. "And the noise is terrible. Let us go home."

Nalini had felt slightly disappointed by Patti’s reaction, but she got over it soon enough. All in all, it had been a very interesting holiday; one she would remember for a long, long time.

School started on the morrow and Nalini felt slightly uneasy when she thought of her results. She need not have worried. Mrs. Sinha announced with a smile that Nalini had topped the class, with Richa a close second. Nalini sat in a daze of happiness while the others congratulated her. Aditi was relieved to have done reasonably well.
"I suppose all that joint study paid off," she told Nalini and grinned. "It is too much hard work, really."

More than anything, Nalini was happy to know she had done almost as well in science and maths as in the other subjects. It looked like they would not remain stumbling blocks for long, so she could hope to do as well in the final exams. There was general rejoicing in the class for, except Manisha, no one else had come to grief over any subject. Sonam, for instance, wore an elated look on her face, though she refused to divulge her marks.

Nalini was longing to break the news at home and could hardly wait for school to end. One look at her excited face and Patti must have guessed the truth. However, she waited patiently for Nalini to say it. "Amma’s prayers worked," said the jubilant girl. "I told her to pray hard."

"I prayed for you too," said Patti quietly and Nalini felt very touched.

"Oh, I didn’t know," she said. "Thank you, Patti."

"Will Appa take us for ice-creams today?" Arun asked hopefully.

"Let us see," said Nalini.

However, Appa did better than that. "We will go out for dinner tonight," he said.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! I want a cheese pizza this time," Arun was delighted.

"No pizzas," said Appa firmly. "Patti won’t like them. We will go to a new restaurant I have been reading about—The South Indian Paradise. It is quite nearby."

"Will we be back in time for Amma’s call?" asked
Nalini anxiously, brushing aside Arun's protests. "She said she would call tonight."

"Of course, we will," said Appa. "If not, then we will call her back."

Dinner was a long and leisurely affair. Arun, moodily attacking his plate of idlis said, "I don't like this sambar. Patti makes better sambar at home."

Patti's face glowed at this unexpected praise.

"That is true," agreed Appa, "but Patti also needs a change from cooking all the time. We will order ice-creams as soon as you have finished."

Arun cheered up immediately and ate his food with gusto.

Patti suddenly said, "Nalini, remember I asked you to call your friends home? Why don't you call them on Saturday?"

Nalini was very pleased. She had been unsure whether to bring up the topic with Patti and was thrilled now that Patti remembered her promise. Yet she was hesitant as well.

"I can, Patti. Are you sure? Will it be a problem?"

Before Patti could respond, Appa said, "We can order pizzas or whatever you like from outside. That will save Patti the bother of cooking."

"Nonsense!" Patti sounded very firm. "I have cooked for fifty people at a time back home. What is the problem in cooking for a few schoolgirls? I will make everything at home."

"May I call my friends too?" asked Arun eagerly.

"No," said Nalini. "Appa, tell him he can't do that. If he does, then I won't call my friends."
Arun's lips quivered. "Your friends are stupid any-
way and..."

"How dare you talk like that!" Nalini was very angry. "I will..."

"Now stop that at once," Appa said sternly. "No more quarrelling."

"Arun can call his friends another day," suggested Patti soothingly, and the little boy was satisfied and grinned happily.

Nalini glowered at him while he pestered Patti for details. Arun was impossible! Sometimes she envied Aditi who was a single child.
A Grand Lunch

Renuka took one look at Arun and beckoned to him. "Tell me your name and everything," she invited, drawing him onto her lap.

Arun stiffened and tried to resist her, but she whispered something in his ear making him laugh out loud and relax immediately.

"What did you tell him?" Nalini asked curiously.

"Don't tell...don't tell. It is a secret!" Arun yelled out.

Nalini began to feel annoyed. She watched Arun telling Renuka all about his school and friends and the games he liked and so on.

She felt half-impatient and half-jealous. Arun had never talked to her in that way. In fact, she hardly knew anything of his activities at school, and here he was telling Renuka all about a school drama and the possibility of his being a monkey in it. When she considered it, that was the way Renuka was. As soon as she had come, she had made everyone feel at ease.

Nalini, in particular, had been very fidgety since morning. She had asked Muniamma to clean the house properly and had got in her way pointing out bits of grime, till the latter was exasperated. Then she had rushed off to wash her hair and had debated long over what to wear. She finally settled on a pair of jeans and top, wondering, all the while, why she felt so nervous. Perhaps it was because few people, other than Aditi, had ever come home for lunch. She was anxious that Renuka should form a good impression of her visit.

"You are to behave yourself," she had warned Arun.
"If you behave stupidly before my friends, then you will get a slap from me!"

Arun had looked very indignant. "I will tell Appa what you said," he cried in an injured tone. "If you say things like that, then I won't behave."

He had slipped out of Nalini's reach and run off to the garden. Nalini had clicked her tongue impatiently and contented herself by imagining all the things she would do to him if he misbehaved.

"Do you need help, Patti?" she asked entering the kitchen, which already exuded a lovely smell.

"Don't come in here with your hair loose," scolded Patti. "Always tie your hair before entering the kitchen or it will fall into everything."

For once, Nalini did not feel resentful at the rebuke—she was too excited. When she returned with a clasp around her hair, Patti set her to taking out the plates.

"I prefer the normal stainless steel plates," Patti said, "you will probably want something different. You decide what you want."

Nalini had taken out the brown dinner set, washed and dried it and then laid the table carefully. It was too early—only 11 o'clock—but this seemed to be the only help Patti wanted.

"What have you made, Patti?" she asked, opening the lids of dishes and getting in Patti's way. She was promptly shooed out of the kitchen with instructions to wait and see.

Renuka had arrived not long after. Her father had dropped her in the car and had promised to pick her up in the evening. Patti liked the look of Renuka, it
was quite obvious from her face. Aditi had come soon after and the three friends had settled down in Nalini’s room for a cozy chat. It was then that Arun, half-shy and half-curious, had peeped in at the door and Renuka had called him in.

A delicious smell pervaded the house when they were called for lunch.

"Will you sit with me?" Renuka asked Arun.

Nalini was horrified. "No, he is going to eat in his room," she said hastily. Luckily, Arun was overcome by a fresh bout of shyness and vanished voluntarily.

"He is really cute," said Renuka. "I wish I had a brother like him—but I am the youngest. So sad!"

Nalini raised her eyes heavenwards. "You don't know what you are saying," she said.

Aditi laughed. "Oh, Arun is not too bad. Nalini is just exaggerating as usual."

When the girls saw the spread on the table, they gasped in surprise. Even Nalini was taken aback. When had Patti found the time to make all these things? There was *bisibele* (hot *sambar* rice), *rasam*, *uadas*, *appalams*, coconut chutney, plain rice and beans curry with coconut gratings on top. Suddenly Nalini felt her eyes stinging with tears at the thought that Patti had made all this for her and her friends. She had been slaving away since morning to make sure they had a wonderful lunch.

"How can we eat all this food, Patti?" Aditi protested.

"Of course, you can," Patti chided. "Girls of your age should be able to eat twice as much and even digest stones! Now eat quickly while the food is hot."

"Won’t you join us?" asked Renuka.
"No, I will eat with Arun," Patti said. "You girls will want to talk and will certainly not want a boring old lady around."

She laughingly brushed aside their protests and instructed Nalini to look after her guests. The girls ate with great relish.

"I love South Indian food," said Aditi. "If Patti agrees, I will eat here everyday."

"You are most welcome," laughed Nalini.

"I have never eaten such wonderful things before," sighed Renuka. "Nalini, your grandmother is great!" Nalini felt proud on hearing this. She had invited some colony girls for birthday parties before but Amma, being busy, would usually order food from outside. There had never been such elaborate meals as this one. She smiled happily and the smile broadened into a beam when Muniamma, who had stayed back to help, came in with payasam (boiled rice and sugar in milk).

"Divine!" exclaimed Renuka. "Oh, Nalini, I have put on ten more kilos, I think."

As Renuka was inclined to be plump, the others rolled their eyes in mock dismay and giggled.

"We are behaving like some kids in junior school," commented Aditi. "Giggling every two seconds and stuffing ourselves."

"So what?" demanded Renuka stoutly. "I am really enjoying myself."

Patti came in just then to see if they had finished and they heaped praises on her.

"You will learn to cook as well when you are older and married," she said.
"Not likely, Patti," laughed Aditi. "Nowadays men cook too, so it is not necessary for us to learn."

"You should learn it for yourself," said Patti severely. "You must know some basic things."

"Basic, yes," grinned Renuka, "like tea and squash and so on."

Patti shook her head. "The girls of today!" she said resignedly.

They had a lovely time chatting about school and work. Nalini had always been curious about Renuka’s days with Richa’s gang, and brought the subject up deliberately. To her surprise, Renuka did not want to vilify Richa in any way.

"She is a nice girl in some ways," she said shortly.

"That is the last thing I would say about her!" Nalini said with great emphasis. "That whole lot is sickening."

"Nalini, don’t judge people so quickly," said Renuka suddenly. "Yes, they make silly jokes and pass remarks, but you don’t know them better than that."

Nalini felt very uncomfortable. Why was Renuka defending Richa so vehemently?

"Well, you knew them well enough and you moved away," she said sulkily. "Why did you do that?"

"Oh, I just thought I would be better off on my own," said Renuka mysteriously. "I didn’t much like being part of a big gang."

And Nalini had to leave it like that. However, later on, when she was leaving, Renuka said, "It is my birthday next week—on the 15th. I am calling you both for lunch, and a few others maybe. Will you come?"

"Of course," Aditi agreed instantly.
Nalini nodded too and then asked curiously, "Will you call anyone else from school?"

"Richa maybe," said Renuka vaguely. "I haven't decided yet."

Nalini was tempted to make excuses but she caught Aditi's eye and subsided.

Later, Aditi said, "You can't decide her guest list for her. And if you back out now, it will be obvious why."

Nalini was annoyed. "It will be awful with Richa there," she complained. "What is wrong with Renuka? She rarely speaks to that gang. I can't understand her."

"I think she is still fond of Richa though," said Aditi thoughtfully. "She must have left that gang because of Meghna and Shalini and the others."

"And no wonder!" said Nalini with conviction.

That night she wondered how to show Patti her gratitude for the lunch. She had thanked her and Patti had been very pleased, but mere words did not seem to suffice.

"I will get her something nice," she decided. "I will get Appa to take me to Shopping Arcade some time, so I can buy her a proper gift."

Some days later, as Nalini was running down their driveway while going to the bus-stop, Mrs. Anand hailed her from across the fence.

"Nalini, are you in a hurry?" she asked, somewhat unnecessarily.

Nalini nodded her head, barely able to conceal her impatience. She was already late because a button on her blouse had fallen off that morning as she wrestled with it, and she had to sit down and stitch it at once.
"I had to ask you something," said Mrs. Anand in disappointed tones. "But you go if you are in a hurry." Nalini hesitated. It seemed rather rude to run off when Mrs. Anand sounded like that.

"What is it, Aunty?" she said. "I think I can spare a minute."

"Oh, then I will tell you," Mrs. Anand spoke fast. "Uncle has got passes for the World Book Fair. And I don't want to go alone. So I wondered if you would like to come with me. I know you like books," she added confidently.

Nalini was thrilled at the invitation. She was a voracious reader and a chance of visiting the World Book Fair, that was running for a fortnight, was too good to miss. Ordinarily she would have pestered her mother to take her, but she knew Appa could not spare time in his busy schedule for the Fair. And it was too far away for Nalini to consider going alone or with Aditi.

"I would love to go, Aunty," she said eagerly.

"Then should we go this afternoon?" suggested Mrs. Anand, smiling all over her broad face. "After you have your lunch, you give me a call and we will go. Uncle will send the car for us."

"Sure, Aunty," Nalini snatched up her school bag. "Now I have got to run. See you this afternoon."

'What fun!' she thought gleefully. 'I hope we don't get any homework today, so I can enjoy myself fully.'

It was too late to ask Appa for money, but Nalini had her own private cache of accumulated birthday money. She had not known what to spend it on and
had decided to save it for something worthwhile. She could buy plenty of books with that.

'I wonder why aunty wants to go to the Book Fair of all places,' she wondered, i don't think she is interested in books at all. She probably just wants an outing. Still that is good for me!

To her surprise, Patti was not too keen on the idea, when Nalini told her of it on her return from school.

"You have not asked Appa for permission," she said. "I can't just let you go off like that. What will he say?"

"Don't fuss, Patti," said Nalini irritably. "Appa would have taken me anyway if he had the time. He won't say anything. In fact, he will be happy I went."

"When will you be back?" asked Patti, looking and sounding dubious.

"I will call aunty and ask," Nalini was exasperated. "You don't need to worry if she is with me. We will come back safely, don't worry."

Arun came out of his room, hearing the argument and piped in, "I am coming with you."

"No, you are not," said Nalini firmly. "Aunty has only two passes. And she asked me. So you can't come."

Patti had a bright idea. "I will ask Appa and take both of you one day. Why don't you wait for that?"

"Patti, the Fair is on only for another five days!" protested Nalini. "And if we can't go, then I will feel awful about it."

Patti relented. "All right. But you must take care. These places are very crowded."

"I know that, Patti," Nalini was really annoyed now. Why was Patti making such a fuss? She could
take care of herself; she was not a kid like Arun! She gave Mrs. Anand a call, found out that they would be back in a couple of hours, and then left with her in their car.

The Fair was a real treat. No matter how many times Nalini saw the pavilions stacked with books from floor to ceiling, it always gave her a special thrill. Even the feel and the smell of books were wonderful to her. Crowds milled around the stalls and, at first, it was a little bewildering. As she had expected, Mrs. Anand was not very interested in the books and was inclined to skip stalls, without even a glance at the titles displayed. This was irksome to Nalini, who wanted to browse at a leisurely pace. She had to do something about it.

"Aunty, why don't we go round the Fair separately?" she suggested. "We could meet later at that Coffee Shop at the entrance."

Plump Mrs. Anand, who was beginning to be oppressed by the crowds and did not like the idea of lingering too much, agreed promptly. They fixed a time and Nalini was on her own. She enjoyed herself thoroughly, walking from stall to stall. To her delight she saw a stall selling Tamil books.

'I will buy one for Patti,' she decided. That would make a great Thank you' present.'

She had some difficulty in selecting a novel and finally had to rely on the salesman's choice. She put it in her bag with a feeling of great satisfaction.

'Patti win be thrilled,' she thought. 'I can't wait to see her face.'
Someone called out her name and she whirled round in surprise. Renuka was standing there, grinning widely, with her two elder sisters.

"This is great!" Nalini beamed. "Imagine meeting you here!"

Renuka introduced Nalini to her sisters and was about to question her friend on her purchases, when a distressed figure hove in sight, pushing its way through the crowds. It was Mrs. Anand, perspiring profusely and looking very uncomfortable.

"Thank God I found you!" she cried, clutching Nalini’s arm. "Let us go home now, beta. It is too crowded and anyway I have seen quite a lot. My legs have started aching."

Nalini was dismayed. "Oh, we have hardly been here for half-an-hour. I wanted to see so much more."

"No, beta," Mrs. Anand was firm. "I have had enough of the Fair. I want to go home now."

Nalini had no option but to agree reluctantly. Just then, Renuka’s eldest sister, Tara, said, "If you would like to stay back, we can drop you at your place. We came by car. I can drive you back. There is no problem."

"Oh, that would be great!" said Nalini in delight. She looked pleadingly at Mrs. Anand. "Aunty, could I stay back with my friends? Renuka is my classmate, you know. Patti knows her. They would drop me home. Will you please tell Patti?"

"Don’t know what more is there to see here," muttered Mrs. Anand. "All right. You come later. I will tell your grandmother."
"Thanks, Aunty," Nalini was ecstatic. What luck running into Renuka like this! She linked hands with her friend and the four girls wandered around the stalls, browsing to their heart’s content. Tara and Deepa, the other sister, were as friendly as Renuka, and Nalini had a thoroughly enjoyable time.

It was when they went to have coffee, at long last, that Nalini discovered the time. It was 6 o’clock—more than two hours since Mrs. Anand had left—and the skies outside were darkening. Patti would be really worried! She ought to have checked the time before this. Tara saw the dismay on her face and acted promptly.

"Let us go now," she said. "I just lost track of the time, it was such fun inside." She hustled the others into the car and started off. "Tell me the way," she told Nalini.

"I don’t know it properly," said Nalini with a sinking heart. "I mean...I know you go straight down the road and turn left, but after that I am not sure. I...I didn’t notice." She had conveniently assumed that Tara would know the way once she told her the address.

Tara, sensing the younger girl’s anxiety, laughed lightly. "Don’t worry. We will ask around. I will get you home in one piece."

Nalini stared out of the window in silence. She could have kicked herself for not noticing the way in the afternoon. Perhaps she should have gone home with Mrs. Anand after all. What if they could not find the way and got home only after some hours? Then she shook herself. It was only a little after 6 o’clock anyway. And Mrs. Anand would have told Patti about Renuka. There was no need for any worry.
An Accident

"No, we won't come in now," said Tara in response to Nalini's invitation. "Some other time maybe. It is nearing seven. We would better get home."

Nalini thanked them profusely and waved till the car went out of sight. Then she turned around and trudged back towards her house. What an experience it had been! They were misdirected twice and had gone round in circles till an auto driver had obligingly shown them the way. Nalini was very apologetic, but Deepa had claimed to have a worse sense of direction, and said Tara was a little better.

"Worse comes to worse, you come home with us and spend the night," suggested Renuka.

Nalini grinned to herself now as she thought of this. She would have had to borrow Renuka's uniform and would have drowned in it. Even then she could not possibly have gone to school without her books.

The front door clicked open and Patti stood at the doorway. She did not answer Nalini's greeting, but simply stood aside to let her in. Then she disappeared without a word into the kitchen. Nalini, unsure of what to make of Patti's mood, stood helplessly in the hall. Arun tiptoed his way to her.

"Patti is very angry," he whispered importantly. "She says she will never let you go out again. She says that..."

Nalini did not wait to hear more. She threw her bag aside and marched to the kitchen defiantly. What did Patti mean by saying such things? Tired out from her
ramblings and the worry, she felt very close to tears.

Patti was putting away dishes in the cupboard. When she saw Nalini’s angry face, she said, "I was sick with worry but you never thought of that, did you? Why have you come home now, Nalini? You could have come much later."

Nalini was stung by the charge and the sarcasm. "Why do you say that?" she cried. "Didn’t Anand aunty tell you everything?"

"She did," said Patti grimly. "That is not the point. You had no right to make such decisions on your own. I sent you with aunty and that meant you were to come back with her—not with whom you felt like."

"But you know Renuka!" Nalini exclaimed. "What was the problem in coming back with her? Anand aunty wanted to come back almost as soon as we got there and..."

"Then you should have come back with her," said Patti angrily. "You have been given too much freedom. That is the problem. You have no sense of responsibility that you should come home at the time fixed, or think that anyone is worrying about you. How do I know whether you have been kidnapped or met with an accident or got lost? You come back at 7 o’clock in the evening—a young girl like you—and think you will be excused? From now on, I will not let you out of the house."

Angry sobs were choking Nalini. Her eyes filled with tears that spilled onto her cheeks.

"Who are you to decide things like that?" she cried furiously. "You don’t understand anything. I wish Amma
were here! I wish you had never come here! I wish...."
She broke down now and ran to her room, pushing a
confused Arun out of the way. She cried long and
hard—for the day that had gone wrong, for Patti's
words, and for the funny, guilty feeling inside her that
would not go away. There was a scared tap at the door
and Arun poked his head in.

"Here is your bag," he said. "You left it on the floor."
Not hearing a response, he went on, "Are you very
angry with Patti?"

"Get out!" ordered Nalini.

Arun rushed out and shut the door. Nalini examined
the books in her bag. She found no pleasure in them,
though she had been thrilled to find them at the Fair.
She arranged the books on her table, but left the Tamil
novel in the bag. She would never give it to Patti.

Nalini remained in her room, though she felt hungry
and thirsty. After some time, she took out her home-
work and began to work. It was not much—just a poem
to learn—and she had soon memorized it.

The doorbell rang as she shut the book. She knew
Appa had returned from office. Arun poked his head
in again. "You are to come for dinner," he said.

Nalini first contemplated skipping the meal, but
realized that it would not solve anything. Appa was
too tired to notice anything amiss and she was able to
eat in silence. Patti concentrated on Arun and hardly
looked at her.

Arun kept glancing from one face to another and
finally burst out, "Patti and Nalini are very angry with
each other."
Appa looked up from his food and frowned. "What is the matter? What happened?"

Nalini waited for Patti to pour out her complaints. To her surprise, the expected tirade did not come. Appa shook his head at Arun and said, "Don't imagine things."

The little boy looked indignant and was about to open his mouth when Patti said, "Arun, eat your food. No more talking."

Her tone was such that Arun did not dare disobey her. He gulped down his food, wondering why grown-ups were so hard to understand.

Nalini's mind, meanwhile, was a perfect whirl of thoughts. Why had Patti kept quiet? Was she still angry or not? One glance at her face told her that Patti was still fuming. This made her silence all the more puzzling. Perhaps Patti would tell Appa the next morning. That did not make sense either.

Beneath all the anger in her mind, Nalini suddenly felt very small. Her conscience pricked her as she remembered her last words to Patti. Then she shook her head and felt defiant. Patti had no right to ban her from going out and to say those dreadful things. There was no need to feel sorry for what had happened.

Nalini spent a very restless night.

In the morning, Patti kept Nalini's breakfast on the table. She did not wait to see whether she finished it.

For one wild moment, Nalini thought she should rush into the kitchen and apologize to Patti, but a part of her was against it.

'What have I done that is so terribly wrong?' she wondered. 'It was not my fault that we lost the way.'
She tried to push away the thought that it was her fault for staying back so late and for not considering anyone at home. Arun came up just then and, seeing her clenched fists, said, "Are you going to fight with Patti again?"

Nalini was rudely distracted from her thoughts. She glared at Arun.

"You are the most stupid boy in the whole world!" she said and, roughly pushing him aside, stalked off to her room to get her bag.

Patti did not come to say goodbye as she usually did and Nalini ran off to the bus-stop, relieved to escape from the house. She was glad to see Aditi and told her a limited version of what had happened, carefully leaving out the real quarrel and how late she had actually been. Somehow she knew that Aditi would not sympathize with her side of the story.

Aditi nodded absent-mindedly and then said in an undertone, "You know, I just heard something awful about Shalini and Meghna. I think they have been suspended from school or expelled or something."

Nalini stared at Aditi in shock, all thoughts of her problem driven from her mind. "What? What on earth do you mean?" she exclaimed.

"Don't shout like that!" hissed Aditi. "It is just a rumour." She gestured towards the other girls at the stop. "They were talking about it."

The rumour proved to be true. The school was full of it. It seems Shalini and Meghna had been caught the previous day at a nearby movie theatre by the manager who, knowing the school well, recognized the
uniform and knew that the girls had no business being there during school hours. The Principal had been informed and the parents of the frightened girls had been summoned. The angry Principal had wanted to expel the girls without further ado, but had relented far enough to allow them another chance. They had been suspended from school for a fortnight, however, and were taken home in deep disgrace.

Mrs. Sinha's face was stony while she lectured the girls on honesty and obedience, and expressed her shock that the wrongdoers belonged to her class.

"Is this what we teach you in school?" she stormed. "If, at the age of fourteen, you are not responsible enough to be trusted, it does not speak well of you as a person."

Nalini wriggled uncomfortably at the words and stole a glance at the rest of the class. Richa was looking very upset and Nalini wondered whether she had known of the plan. She remembered Renuka's words at break-time and impulsively decided to speak to Richa, who was sitting alone at her desk and writing something. Aditi had gone to pay her fees at the office, so Nalini approached the girl alone.

"Richa, I am sorry about your friends," she began uncertainly.

"Are you?" Richa raised her head and her eyes flashed in anger. "Don't give me your false sympathy. I know you are thrilled about it—so don't pretend."

Nalini managed to control herself with difficulty, but her eyes were blazing too. Coming on top of all her problems, this was too much! Not trusting herself to
speak, she stalked out of the class and bumped into Renuka and Aditi.

"What is wrong?" asked Aditi immediately.

Nalini choked out the story and Renuka looked very troubled.

"Just forget it," advised Aditi. "Come on. Let us go to the canteen. I will treat you to a cold drink."

Nalini allowed herself to be taken away, but her mind was still seething with rage. She wished she had lashed out at Richa instead of walking away like that.

The day dragged on as if it would never end. Nalini had a slight headache—the aftermath of the previous day's crying—and she longed to go home. She studiously avoided looking in Richa's direction and tried to concentrate on her work. It was difficult to do that though, with her mind buzzing with problems.

"I hope your grandmother wasn't angry?" Renuka had asked her.

"No, no, of course, not," Nalini lied, "there was no problem at all."

Her headache had worsened slightly by the time she got off the bus in the afternoon.

"Will you come today?" Aditi asked.

Nalini thought of Path's ban and said, "I am not sure. I will give you a call."

She reached home and rang the bell. There was no answer so she rang again. Then, with a start of surprise, she noticed a lock on the door. Where had Patti gone? And where was Arun? Surely they could not have gone off somewhere in the middle of the afternoon!

As she looked around uncertainly, Mrs. Anand
emerged from her house and ran to the fence.

"I was waiting for you," she said, looking very flustered. "Come home. I have the key."

"Where is everyone?" Nalini asked as she ran round to the next-door house. "Where has my grandmother gone, Aunty?"

"Come and sit down first," Mrs. Anand said kindly and escorted the girl inside. A cold dread clutched at Nalini's heart. Something terrible had happened! Patti must have had an accident... "It is Arun, beta," said Mrs. Anand, looking very distressed. "He met with an accident in school. They called home and at the office. Your father came to collect Patti and they have gone to the hospital." Nalini felt as if the words were coming from far away.

There was a roaring sound in her ears and she suddenly felt very sick. "What accident?" she managed to say.

"It seems he was running towards his bus, when a scooter came from the opposite direction and hit him. He was hurt in the head and they took him to the Rosemary Hospital straightaway," Mrs. Anand looked as if she was about to cry.

"When will they let me know?" asked Nalini. "Can I go to the hospital? Will you take me there, Aunty?" She sounded calm but was trying hard not to break down before Mrs. Anand. The thought of Arun in hospital probably badly injured or crying for Amma, was too hard to bear. He had always been scared of doctors and injections. Someone had given him a doctor's set on his last birthday, but he had been afraid
of the instruments and had never played with them.
And, just this morning, she had called him the most stupid boy in the whole world!
'God has done this to punish me,' she thought, trying to swallow down the lump in her throat.
The telephone rang just then, cutting through Mrs. Anand’s rambling explanations and Nalini’s thoughts. The former rushed to answer it and Nalini waited in apprehension.

"It is your father," Mrs. Anand held out the receiver, her face working with unasked questions, and Nalini took it from her tremulously.
"Appa...how...?"
"Nalini, I am speaking from the Rosemary Hospital," Appa sounded very grim. "Did Mrs. Anand tell you everything?"
"Yes, Appa. How is Arun?"
"Don't worry, Nalini," Appa was obviously trying hard to sound reassuring. "He will be okay."
"What has happened to him?" Nalini persisted. "Where is he hurt?"
"He has broken his left hand," said Appa shortly, "and he has got some injuries on the head. He has just recovered consciousness, so the doctors say they will let us know for certain in some hours. They have to conduct some tests on him." When Nalini did not answer, he went on, "We will hope for the best. It is a good sign that he is conscious."
"Appa, please, I want to come there," Nalini found her voice.
"No, not now," Appa said briefly. "There is no point.
They won't allow you to see Arun. In fact, I am sending Patti home with my office driver. I will stay here till the tests are done and I will give you a call as soon as I know anything. Now cheer up. Everything will be all right, Nalini."

Nalini replaced the receiver with a shaking hand. Mrs. Anand was by her side at once and led her to the dining-room.

"You must eat something," she said persuasively, trying hard not to deluge the harried girl with questions. Nalini shook her head and began to say she felt sick, but Mrs. Anand cut her short.

"You must keep up your strength," she insisted. "It will make matters worse if you fall ill now. Have a little bit at least."

Nalini managed a few mouthfuls and felt much better. Her headache had settled down to a dull throbbing, and she wondered whether to ask for a disprin tablet. Then, all of a sudden, she felt like going back home and stood up.

"Aunty, please give me the keys. I will go home now."

"Oh, no, beta," Mrs. Anand was alarmed. "You must stay here till your Patti comes. Don't go back now." However, Nalini was insistent and Mrs. Anand gave in at last on the ground that Patti would be reaching home soon.

"You must call me if you need anything or if you feel sick," said the good-natured lady.

Nalini felt very touched by her offer and made her way home. She unlocked the door and stepped into the empty house. Then she caught her breath as she
thought of Arun dancing up to her every single day when she returned, and calling her to eat. Had she ever listened to his stories or his plans? No, she had not. Now Arun lay in hospital with serious injuries and might not ever recover again.

A car stopped outside the house and Patti stepped out. Nalini saw her walking up the drive and opened the door. Patti entered the house and the two looked at each other in silence. The tears that Nalini had been choking back for so long, escaped in a great rush and she fell into Path's arms, crying as if her heart would break.
The Sequel

Nalini wiped her face and looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. Her eyes were red and swollen and her face, despite the washing, was tear-streaked. She had cried bitterly for quite a while until Patti had told her gently to stop and to wash her face.

"You will feel better then," she had said, and Nalini had obeyed her quietly.

Patti was in the drawing-room when she came back and Nalini stood hesitantly, wondering where to go and what to do. Patti looked up and beckoned her.

"Come and sit here," she said.

Nalini went and sat beside her on the sofa, and Patti took one of her hands in her own and patted it.

"Arun will be all right," she said. "I have prayed to God that his injuries heal fast so that he can come home soon." She looked anxiously into Nalini's face, hoping that she was calmer. The violence of her tears had alarmed Patti considerably. Nalini sat twisting her fingers and swallowing hard. The storm seemed to have abated, but there was obviously something on her mind.

"Is he scared?" she asked at last.

"He is too tired to feel anything, Nalini," said Patti. "However, the doctor is very nice. He says all our worry will be over quite soon." She deliberately left out the doctor's caution 'if everything goes off well'. There was no point in frightening Nalini further.

"I didn't mean to shout at him all the time," said Nalini, feeling as if her tears would start again. "I do love him, Patti. I do."
Patti pulled Nalini into her arms and hugged her warmly.

"I know you love him," she said simply. "I was like that with my brother. We fought all the time. Our parents used to scold us. But our love for each other was always there. And now, even though he is far away, we are still close to each other."

"If Arun comes back, I will be really nice to him," said Nalini, her lips quivering. "I really will, Patti."

Patti cradled Nalini in her arms as she often did with Arun. "Don't say 'if he comes back'" she admonished gently. "Of course, he is coming back. Wait and see—he will be asking for you very soon."

They sat in a companionable silence for quite some time. Their quarrel seemed to have been forgotten for the moment and indeed it was far away from Nalini's mind at least.

"Will you pray very hard, Patti?" Nalini raised her head from Patti's lap.

"I will. And you pray too. God will definitely answer our prayers." Patti sounded so confident that Nalini was slightly cheered.

The phone rang suddenly, bringing Nalini to her feet. However, it was only Mrs. Anand calling to find out if there was any further news and if they wanted anything.

"Why hasn't Appa called?" Nalini fretted. "They must have done the tests by now."

"He said he would call as soon as he knew," said Patti simply. Then, to distract Nalini, she added, "Why don't you ask Aditi to come over?"

"No, not now," Nalini sounded very definite. "I want
to be with you, Patti," and she went back to the sofa.

The old lady's face lit up for an instant as she hugged Nalini closer to her.

Appa called at 6 o'clock. Nalini's heart almost stopped when she heard his voice on the phone.

"What is it, Appa?" she asked apprehensively.

"Good news, Nalini," Appa sounded relieved. "They have done the tests and they say there is nothing wrong with him. Though it will take time for the hand to mend, he is going to be fine."

"When can I see him?" Nalini asked, feeling so limp with relief that she had to sit down. She nodded her head at Patti to indicate that it was good news.

"Tomorrow. Anyway I am coming home in a while, so I will tell you in detail." Appa rang off and Nalini did a little celebratory dance round the room. There was nothing seriously wrong with Arun, that was all that mattered.

Then she called Mrs. Anand to tell her the news. Nalini was touched by that lady's obvious relief and joy. "Uncle was worried too!" declared Mrs. Anand. "I rang him in office and told him. He will be so happy to hear this."

While Patti ran to get the dinner ready, Nalini called up Aditi and told her everything. Aditi was horrified. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?" she cried. "I would have come over and well...just been with you."

"No, it is okay. Patti was with me," Nalini said at once. "Thanks anyway. You are a great friend," she said.

"Why the dialogue?" Aditi teasingly demanded, slowly getting over the shock.
"Make the most of it," Nalini chuckled. "I might not praise you again for a long time." She replaced the receiver, feeling very light-hearted. Her headache had almost gone and she actually felt hungry.

Appa came home soon after looking exhausted but relieved. "Amma said she would call at ten," he told Nalini. "I called her from the hospital only after the tests. There is no point in alarming her when she is so far-off."

"Let us eat," said Patti. "Then you can go to sleep early. You have had a long day." Appa nodded ruefully.

Over dinner Nalini plied him with questions on the accident.

"That little imp was racing with Shankar to get into the bus after school," explained Appa. "A school clerk was coming out of the building on his scooter at the same time. He says he meant to turn into the main road. Apparently the lads didn't see him and he tried to swerve away, but it was too late."

"Was Shankar hurt?" asked Nalini.

"No, just some minor bruises but he howled and brought the place down, so everyone came rushing and Arun was taken promptly to the hospital." Then Appa looked straight at Nalini and said, "I can tell you now since the doctors have given Arun a clean chit. It seems it was quite serious—being a head injury and all that. The doctors told me that if they had delayed taking Arun to the hospital, or if that clerk had not swerved, then it would have been a near thing."

Nalini's hair stood on end when she heard this. They had so nearly lost Arun!
The phone rang, breaking into Nalini’s thoughts. It was Amma, very upset and anxious, and all set to come back.

“There is no need for that,” Appa reassured her. “Now it is just a matter of healing. In fact, we are bringing Arun home in a day or two. You can talk to him then.”

Nalini spoke to Amma too and was filled with sympathy for her. She was distant and helpless when such a thing had happened.

“Amma, everything is fine,” she said. “We will take care of Arun.” She was a little unnerved to hear Amma’s tearful voice, so she gave the phone to Patti and walked off to her room. Just as she shut the door, she heard Patti say, “Oh, she is so responsible. There is no problem at all. We are managing very well.”

The following morning, Nalini woke up at the usual time, and pleaded with Appa to be allowed to miss school. “I want to go to the hospital instead,” she begged.

“Please, Appa.”

However, Appa was adamant. “No, Nalini. I will take you to see Arun in the evening—you and Patti. There is no need for you to skip school today.”

Nalini was annoyed but she knew better than to argue with Appa. Anyway that would give her time to get something nice for Arun.

Aditi hailed her anxiously at the bus-stop. “What news? Is Arun okay?”

“There is no more news since last night,” Nalini said. “They don’t allow people to stay at the hospital. That is why my father came home. Appa is going
there now and he is taking us in the evening."

"Thank God, he is okay," said Aditi fervently. 
"Mummy says with the kind of traffic on the roads, you just don't feel like stepping out of the house these days. It is too dangerous."

"This wouldn't have happened if Arun had been sensible," said Nalini, a touch of asperity in her voice. "The silly thing was racing across the road with his friend Shankar. Of all the stupid things to do! There we were half-dead with worry. I bet he never thought of that."

Something stirred in her mind as she said this. Patti had used almost the same words to her the other day. Was that what Patti felt when she had been late? They had not referred to it since, because of Arun. But how could they just push the quarrel aside?

Aditi took one look at her friend's preoccupied expression and said, "Look, don't rub it in too much. I mean, Arun has been punished for being careless. He is probably feeling bad enough as it is. So don't bring it up for a while at least."

"I know," Nalini said absent-mindedly, trying to resolve her own problem in her mind. Renuka came straight to Nalini as soon as she entered the class.

"Aditi told me last night," she said, taking Nalini's hands in her own. "How is Arun?"

"Oh, Arun is going to be fine, thank you." Nalini said almost cheerfully. "He really gave us a scare!"

"I know, Nalini. It must have been awful!" said Renuka sympathetically. "Anyway, I am glad that things
are okay now. If you need anything, just let us know."

"Thanks," Nalini turned away abruptly as sudden tears pricked her eyes. 'What is wrong with me?' she thought. 'I am howling like a kid every two minutes! There is nothing to cry about just because I have such good friends.'

Since no one else seemed to know, Nalini presumed that Aditi and Renuka had kept the news to themselves. In any case, it was a relief not to have to dwell on it and to concentrate on work instead. In fact, she almost found herself enjoying P.T. that she usually loathed, since it was the last period of the day, and it was too tiring to exercise and jump around. As they were about to walk back to class to get their bags, Nalini suddenly found herself alone. She glanced around for Aditi and Renuka, and saw them standing together at the end of the line. Renuka had obviously planned this, for Richa now slipped into place beside Nalini.

"Do you mind if I walk with you?" she asked.

Nalini shrugged her shoulders, remembering anew how Richa had behaved the previous day.

"I heard about your brother," Richa was saying, in a tone so unlike her usual arrogant one, that Nalini was intrigued. "I am really sorry about it."

"It is okay," Nalini said in an indifferent tone.

"And Nalini, I am really sorry for snapping at you that day," went on Richa, rather nervously. "You see, I had told Shalini and Meghna not to do it, but they went ahead without telling me. And since I am always with them, the Principal thought I knew something about it so she gave me a bad time. And...and then
you came and said those things...and I was so upset then that I bit your head off. I didn’t mean to, really, and I am very sorry."

They had reached the classroom by now. Nalini realized how difficult it must have been for Richa to say all this. Perhaps Renuka had scolded her or something.

"It is okay," she said again, smiling a little shyly. "It doesn’t matter. And...thanks for asking about Arun. He is okay now."

Richa grinned back, relieved, and went to her desk. Feeling rather awkward and unsure, Nalini walked off to her bus. So much had happened in the last two days that it made her head swim to think of it!

After lunch, Nalini walked down to the market and bought a big slab of milk chocolate for Arun. She came home and gift-wrapped it neatly. She could hardly wait to see Arun’s face at the sight of the chocolate. She hurriedly did her homework, so that she would be perfectly free for the hospital visit. Appa came at four and drove Patti and Nalini to the hospital. Nalini, clutching the gift, looked half-fearfully at the imposing building, and the ambulances, the uniformed attendants and the crowds outside it. Appa led them through interminably long corridors and finally they were in Arun’s room.

When she saw Arun smiling through his veritable headgear of bandages, she was struck with horror and had to remind herself sternly that Arun was all right.

"He has been a most difficult patient," twinkled the doctor. "He wants to go home."
Arun pointed to his left hand that was heavily plastered.

"It is broken," he told Nalini proudly. "And it is going to take ages to get okay."

"Good. That will keep you out of mischief," grinned Nalini and held out the package. Arun tore off the wrapping with his right hand and screamed in delight at the chocolate.

"Is it all for me?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, you greedy thing. It is all for you," Nalini leaned forward and gave Arun a peck on the cheek.

"What have you done, Nalini?" exclaimed Appa in mock despair. "Now I will have to pay a huge dentist’s bill as well!"

Everyone laughed, but Arun was soon back to pestering the doctor.

"Uncle, may I go back with them?" he begged.

It was difficult to resist Arun when he smiled that pathetic smile, with all those bandages swathed around his head. However, Dr. Mathur was firm.

"You are staying in that bed, Arun, until I tell you to get up. Now, no more of that question," he said sternly.

Arun subsided, looking very disappointed. Then Nalini whispered in his ear, "There will be a surprise when you get home."

"What?" asked Arun looking terribly excited. "What surprise? Tell me now."

"Then it won’t be a surprise," objected Nalini. "You will just have to wait and see. Right, Patti?"

The old lady did not have a clue as to what they were talking about, but she nodded her head vigorously.
"I will tell you later, Patti," Nalini promised. Then it was time to go and Nalini patted Arun’s cheek.

"Get well, you silly thing," she said. "We miss you at home."

"Do you?" Arun was very pleased. "Lots and lots?"

"Lots and lots," agreed Nalini and when she left the room, she heard Arun say "Yes! Yes! Yes!" to himself. They had dinner that night in a much more relaxed frame of mind. Amma called again and was relieved to hear that Arun was getting better. Appa had a long talk with her but Nalini did not pay much attention, as she was wrestling with a problem of her own. She helped to clear the table, and waited till Patti finished her prayers and went into her room. Then she followed her and stood, a little hesitantly, at the door.

"What is it, Nalini?" Patti looked surprised.

Nalini felt her cheeks burning but she had determined to say her piece. "Patti, I was awful the other day. I am so sorry for being late and then shouting at you and...and all that," she ended lamely.

Patti smiled. "If you are sorry, then it is all right. We won’t talk about it again. I was so worried and angry, I shouted a lot too."

A load slipped off Nalini’s mind. She had been dreading this talk, but things had been solved so easily. Then she held out a small package to Patti. It was gift-wrapped and tied with a bow.

"What is it?" Patti asked, accepting it reluctantly. "Don’t waste money on me, Nalini. You don’t have to make me gifts. Am I a child or what?"

Her brusque tone masked the softness in her eyes as
she undid the bow and carefully removed the paper. "It is a Tamil novel," said Nalini. "I hope you like it."

Patti gazed at the book in silence. Then she got up and hugged Nalini warmly. "It is a lovely gift," Patti said and Nalini was thrilled. She was a little startled to see the tears in Patti's eyes.

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A Welcome Resolve

The car stopped outside the house and Arun climbed out with Appa. He was ready to rush down the drive, Nalini noticed, but Appa restrained him. As soon as Appa clicked open the gate, Arun stood still. Balloons of all hues hung from the front door and a huge poster, painstakingly coloured by Nalini, proclaimed 'Welcome Home, Arun' in big, bold letters. A little knot of people, a motley welcoming committee, stood at the door. There were Nalini and Patti, of course. Besides them, there were Mrs. Anand, Aditi, Aditi's mother and Shankar—a little, bright-eyed boy, who had mischief writ large on his face.

Nalini had begged his mother to let Shankar stay the day. She had planned this welcoming home party on the spur of the moment at the hospital, and had been hard at work on the details all that week. Arun was to come home on a Sunday, so everyone would be free to help. Aditi had willingly offered her services and the two girls had transformed the drawing-room with balloons, streamers and paper chains.

"Who knew that Mrs. Iyer's awful art classes would come in so handy?" Aditi had joked.

"Oh, yes," Nalini said with feeling. "I used to hate making chains and now we have already made fifty. We are real experts at this."

Aditi's mother had come to help the girls bake a cake. Patti had made several of Arun's favourite dishes for the grand lunch, but the cake was to be the real surprise. Ice-creams had been bought too and carefully
tucked away in the freezer as another surprise.

"We are really pampering this kid," grumbled Nalini as she arranged the plates and bowls.

"Sure we are," agreed Aditi promptly. "Anyone who has been knocked down by a scooter deserves some pampering." She glanced curiously at her friend. This accident had really changed Nalini. Aditi had never known her to be so involved with, or so concerned about Arun before. Things seemed to be different between her and Patti too. Here they were, laughing and talking excitedly with none of the usual strain or awkwardness between them.

'It is really confusing,' Aditi thought and shook her head.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Nalini suddenly, wiping her hands on a hand-towel.

"You, actually," said Aditi and laughed. Luckily Nalini spotted the car just then which saved Aditi from further explanations.

Mrs. Anand, who had come in earlier to help with the preparations, ran as enthusiastically as the others to the front door. She had bought Arun a jigsaw puzzle, which had been carefully kept away in his room. Arun gave a squeal of delight when he saw Shankar, and other arrangements in the drawing-room. "Is it a party? Is it for me? Is this the surprise?" he shouted, his words tumbling over one another.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" laughed Nalini. "Shankar is here till the evening. So you can play with him all you like."

"Arun, be careful, no jumping around," warned Appa. "Remember what the doctor said."
"Uncle, I will take care of him," promised Shankar. "You leave him to me."

"All right. I will do that," said Appa to the earnest imp, trying hard to keep a straight face.

The two boys adjourned to Arun's room and when Nalini peeped in after some time, she saw them hard at work on the jigsaw puzzle. The pieces were scattered all over the bed and the boys were frowning terribly. She withdrew quietly and closed the door.

"Aunty, they are enjoying the puzzle you gave," Nalini told Mrs. Anand, who was bustling away happily in the kitchen. Mrs. Anand beamed. Then, on an impulse, she said, "Thanks for everything, Aunty."

"Oh, you have become a big girl, Nalini, thanking aunty and all that," replied Mrs. Anand, but she looked very pleased.

Lunch was a grand success. Patti's food came in for a lot of praise and there were clamours for recipe from the ladies. Shankar ate silently but steadily, and Nalini was kept busy refilling his plate. As for Arun, he was almost too excited to eat.

"I wish I could have an accident everyday," he said wistfully. "Then I could have parties all the time."

"If you ever talk of having another accident, or if I ever find you racing across the road, I will chain you to my chair," said Appa grimly.

Arun looked at him to see if he was joking, but Appa returned the gaze very solemnly. The little boy was suitably chastened and took an extra helping of Patti's delicious sambar to comfort himself. He had already been scolded roundly at the hospital, and had no wish
to invite further wrath upon his head. He shot a glance at Shankar, his partner-in-crime, but that individual was placidly stuffing himself and refused to look up.

When the dishes were cleared away and the cake and ice-cream were brought in, Arun was back to his excited self. Mrs. Malik had written 'Get Well Soon' in pink icing on the cake and Arun had to be coaxed to cut it, for he did not want to spoil the lettering. As for Shankar, he looked as if his dreams had been answered.

"He has taken four helpings of ice-cream," Nalini whispered to Aditi and giggled.

"He will probably land up in hospital next," observed Aditi gloomily. "His stomach is going to explode anytime." However, no such mishap occurred and, all too soon, the party was over and the guests departed. The Ramanujans thanked them warmly and Nalini went with them all to the main road and saw them off. She had packed some slices of cake for Mr. Anand who had gone out somewhere, and Mrs. Anand bore the parcel home triumphantly, thanking Nalini profusely and being thanked in return.

'What a day!' Nalini thought to herself as she went back in. 'I am so tired that I could sleep for the next ten hours.'

However, something happened to drive away all her exhaustion. A little arm was flung clumsily around her.

"I can't hug you properly," said Arun apologetically, "but will a half-hug do?" Nalini hugged the little boy warmly, taking care not to touch the injured hand.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" she said.

Amma called that night and spoke to Arun for a long
time. Arun was thrilled to be given so much importance and he stood up straight while talking to her.

"I can't comb my hair properly," he announced in ominous tones. "There is a sort of bandage on it, so I can't. If I forget and comb it, then the blood will go all over the place and...."

Appa took the receiver from Arun. "That is enough of scaring Amma," he said. "Now let me talk to her."

"Our son has a great imagination," he told his wife. "He has a future as a writer."

When it was Nalini’s turn to talk, Amma’s voice was full of suppressed excitement.

"I have great news," she said. "I am coming home in a week’s time. My project is nearly done. I have been working really hard so that I could finish it before time."

Nalini was very excited. "When, Amma? What date?"

"I will let you know all that. Let me see if I can book my tickets tomorrow. I am longing to be back!"

"Oh, great!" Nalini was overjoyed and told Arun the news while Patti spoke to Amma.

"Amma didn’t tell me," protested Arun. "Why didn’t she tell me?"

"Because you were so busy giving her horror stories," laughed Nalini. "What fun! Amma is coming back!"

"Then will Patti go back?" asked Arun, bringing her up with a start. This had not occurred to her at all.

Now that Amma was returning, Patti would probably go back home. All of a sudden, Nalini did not feel as concerned as before.

Arun went back to school the following day, armed with a list of instructions.
"If I can't do P.T. and I can't swing, slide or jump, then why am I going to school?" he demanded in an injured tone.

"I thought you went to school to study, Arun," pointed out Appa.

"Oh, that is also there," said Arun. "Anyway, it is no big deal." He left Appa riddled with doubts on the kind of education his son was getting.

However, after that day, Arun was very eager to go to school. His classmates had fusssed over him and written their names on his plaster. He basked in all the admiration and adulation he was getting. The teachers, though, were spoilsports. They kept asking him inconvenient questions like why he had run across the road, and lecturing him on road safety. He had told all this to Nalini and had felt much better. It was so easy to talk to her now. She was never grouchy or angry or full of prickles like she had always been. And she never fought with Patti. Arun sighed as he thought about Patti. He wished she would stay here always. It was fun to have a cuddly grandmother who told you stories and cooked your favourite dishes and made sweets so fast, almost like a magician.

Nalini, meanwhile, was wrestling with the same problem. She had felt awkward asking Patti about her plans straight out, but it seemed that she was making preparations to leave. She had written some letters to Chennai that Appa had posted, and Nalini had even overheard a talk between them on altered train timings. More ominously, she had seen Patti looking speculatively at the contents of her cupboard and at
her trunk as if wondering how to pack them in. Meanwhile, Amma had booked her tickets and was to come on the following Sunday.

"You look a little worried," remarked Patti after lunch one day. "Did something happen in school?"

"No, Patti," Nalini looked around. Arun was watching T.V. and Patti was free. This was the perfect time.

"Patti, I wanted to know, will you go back when Amma comes?" Nalini held her breath for the answer.

"Yes, I will," replied Patti and Nalini's face fell.

"Why, Patti?"

"I only came here to look after you while Amma was away," said Patti, looking a little surprised. "You know that. Now that she is coming back, there is no need for me any more."

"There is!" insisted Nalini, almost fiercely. "Patti, please stay. You can't go back." She tried to think of the arguments she should use. Most of all, she wanted Patti to understand that they wanted her with them. She was now a part of their lives. She could not imagine a day without Patti's comments, her ideas, her solid presence and yes, her scoldings too.

"Patti, there is no one in Chennai. Why should you go back there?" she burst out angrily. "You must stay with us."

"No, Nalini," said Patti gently. "I have a house and my friends and relatives. I am not lonely there. And you and Arun can come there in your holidays. We will go to the beach and the snake park and..."

"Patti, are you saying 'no' because of me?" Nalini asked, her lips quivering. "I didn't mean what I said
that day. Really, I didn't. I was so stupid...but now I can understand things." Her voice broke and she lapsed into silence, trying to hold back her tears.

Patti put an arm around her. "I told you we were going to forget that," she said. "It is not because of you that I am going back. You and Arun are the most loving grandchildren anyone can have. I cannot decide anything so suddenly."

"Does that mean you will think about it—that you might change your mind?" Nalini asked hopefully.

Patti smiled. "Let us see," she said.

And Nalini had to be content with that. There were other things to occupy her mind as well. Renuka's birthday party had been postponed because her house was being whitewashed. She was holding the party now in a fortnight's time and had invited Aditi, Nalini, Richa and some of her sisters' friends to it. Renuka and Richa were quite friendly now, even though Shalini and Meghna had made a subdued reappearance in the school. They formed a twosome since Richa did not seem to want their friendship now.

Meanwhile, it was proving to be an uphill task for Nalini to get over her dislike of Richa, but she was trying hard for Renuka's sake, and because Aditi had pointed out that Richa was also making an effort. So Nalini was looking forward with mixed feelings to the party.

And then, Mrs. Sinha had hinted that those who performed well in class would be considered for a sub-prefect's post the following year. She had smiled at Nalini when she said this and the girl had determined
...to work harder than ever before. It would be a neck-and-neck battle with Richa, she knew. Somehow, she did not feel that fierce hostility towards her any more. There were five posts to be filled anyway, and perhaps Richa and she could fill two of them.

Torn between her worries and her daydreams, Nalini was quite surprised when the day of Amma’s return dawned. The week had sped by so fast that she had hardly noticed it! Appa went to the airport to receive Amma and the others waited eagerly for her to come.

It was a joyous reunion. Everyone spoke at once and Amma had to beg for silence. She had brought presents for everyone—chocolates for Arun, a smart skirt and blouse for Nalini, a shirt for Appa and a beautiful painting for Patti.

"It is good to be back," she sighed, "You seem to have managed beautifully while I was away. Thanks to you, Amma." She flashed Patti a grateful look.

"No, no. What did I do?" laughed Patti. "All I did was cook and scold and nag everyone!"

"No!" shouted Arun. "You are a wonderful Patti!"

Nalini saw tears in Patti’s eyes for the second time.

"Nalini has really changed," remarked Amma to Patti much later, when the children had gone to bed. "There are no more tantrums and arguments. Or is this just for today?"

"No," said Patti with a soft look in her eyes. "Nalini has grown up in these few months. You will see."

A week later, they went to the railway station to see Patti off. It was night but the platform was very crowded. People jostled against them as they stood at
the door of Patti’s carriage. Appa had put away Patti’s trunk under her berth and had begged the young girl, who was to be her travelling companion to look after it. Patti was standing with them on the platform. Arun came back with Appa from an inspection of the engine, and offered to take Patti to see it.

"Don’t trouble her now," Amma smiled. "Amma, do you want anything, magazines or fruit juice or...?"

"I don’t want anything," said Patti. "I have a good novel to read," she smiled at Nalini, "and my stomach is full. Now remember, you must look after yourselves and write to me often."

"We will," promised Nalini.

Arun stuck out his lip. "Don’t want you to go," he growled. "Don’t like saying goodbye."

"I won’t say goodbye then," smiled Patti. "I will say what Nalini tells Aditi everyday,’See you!’"

Tears came into Nalini’s eyes. "Patti, will you think about it? Will you come back to live with us soon?"

Patti looked at the four anxious faces before her and particularly at one tearful but eager one. It was nearly time for the train to move. The platform was emptying and the passengers were getting back into the train.

Appa stepped forward and helped Patti back into the carriage.

"Well, Patti?" Nalini said urgently.

"I will," Patti said, "I think I will."
After a good deal of reluctance when finally Nalini agrees to the arrangement of Patti, 'a stranger', staying over in Amma's absence for six months, little did she imagine that her life would change drastically! For unlike normal grandmothers, Patti is alert, aware, curious about Nalini's and her brother Arun's lives. She is determined to voice her opinion in every situation. Under her watchful eyes Nalini becomes responsible, caring and respectful about people's feelings. Arun and she learn to appreciate their own culture and background. Just when everybody starts taking Patti's benign presence for granted, Amma announces her return! Does that mean Patti will go back to Chennai for good?

A racy fiction.