

... A Little Like Angel Cake

She could tear like wet tissue, his father had explained the evening they met. He would have to be extremely careful around her, was that understood? This, in familiar tones that brooked one sole, monosyllabic, answer.

That night Raghav dreamt of Kalyani, of fragments of her drifting against a sky the shifting shades of those goli soda bottles he had discovered just some months ago, after arriving in this winterless town; a sky that towed the sun into its translucent belly at the very same instant every single day, whether in January or June. Kalyani tearing: Not a body severed and bloody, like the heads and hands Bruce Lee finds within ice blocks in *The Big Boss*, but a portrait ripping, bit by bit, each ragged section of her floating through the breeze, the paint leaving multi-coloured streaks in the air. Only the toes remained – feetless, silently white – on the ground. Raghav woke, glazed in sweat, a tartness coating his tongue and throat and spreading all the way into his belly; he woke shivering, wondering how much it could hurt to come apart like that, if there was some way to put her together again when that happened. He woke again, this time in his parents' bed – though he couldn't remember how or when he reached there; buried in the folds of their coverlet with flaming hibiscus blossoms; his arms braided around, and his nose against, Amma's tummy. Appa must have left already for hospital. It was quieter than sleep.



He hadn't noticed anything tissuey about Kalyani yesterday, when they played together the first time, making paper boats and (sadly, unseaworthy) submarines to sail in the large green plastic tub Major Uncle, her father, had filled for them and placed in the middle of the neat, white sand-rimmed garden that lay between their houses and the shared dirt-track. He just thought Kalyani was the most rainbow-like creature he had ever met. She bore a splotch of purple across her forehead and two more on her elbows. Translucent, wobbly blisters – large and small – of crimson and peach dappled her arms and legs; they looked as though they might fly away any minute, more durable cousins of the shiny soap bubbles he liked to blow with his toy gun.

And her right foot, why, that was like one of the paintings he had wanted to spend all day watching, the one at the exhibition Mrs. Adams had taken them to, at the National Gallery last summer. It was a swirl of deep blue, grey, and orange from ankle to big toe, criss-crossed by thick ridges of glowing black, and bare of all toenails. Kalyani had caught him staring at it, confided, "I have a Grecian foot," and then, when he looked bewildered, elaborated, "Madhav Bhaiyya said the Greeks found that soooooo beautiful they made all those marble statues of their gods with

my feet.” It had taken Raghav a long instant to figure out Kalyani meant *his* Madhav Chettan: he hadn’t ever heard his eldest brother addressed as “Bhaiyya” before; then he remembered – having begun Hindi lessons in school this term, suspiciously grappling with all the new words – that it meant the same thing as Chettan, though it sounded a lot more like the Malayalam word for fear instead, which, he decided, did not suit Madhav Chettan one bit.

So, she had a Grecian right foot – which country did his belong to? And whatever made her foot a storm of colour, unlike the mostly monotone ones around them – the glucose-biscuit-brown of Madhav Chettan and Appa, or polished copper like Amma’s and Keshav Chettan’s feet, or the dried peach Amoomma prided herself on? All talk of feet and their varying charms ceased abruptly, though, when the bright red sailboat, crafted from an old India Today cover – and their most promising creation thus far, having traversed three-fourth of the journey – went belly up, plummeting to the tub-bed with alarming speed.



This morning, the thoughts and doubts from last evening had returned to rattle inside his head. Yes, Madhav Chettan did know the weirdest, most wonderful things, even more since he started going to Medical College to become a doctor like their parents. He would be the person to approach, since Appa – after that brief, cryptic pronouncement – had retreated into his glowering, distracted self. So, when Raghav saw him at breakfast, polishing off a plateful of idli flanked by dollops of sambar and tomato chutney, the questions came tumbling out, some headbutting each other.

“Madhav Chetta, when Kalyani tears into tissue, will it be in big or small bits? Are there parts that fly away? How do you find them? How do you put her back together? Do they teach you how to in Medical College? Do you have to wait like with glue before she’s whole again? Does it hurt to tear? Why are there so many colours on her right foot?”

Then, trying to sound casual about it, “Would I be ugly in Greece?”

Madhav Chettan’s fingers slowed their busy dance on the plate, where they’d been glissading between the mound of idli, the pool of sambar and the thicket of chutney, and came to rest on the rim. He looked up, caught sight of Raghav’s fiercely knit brows, and replied mildly, “Slow down, kutta, catch your breath! What’s this about tearing tissue, and Kalyani, and Greece? One question per idli, all right?”

Pankajakshi-amma, their grandmother's cook who had become a part of the household when they moved in with Amoomma, joined the conversation peremptorily: "Raghava, kutta, eat instead of bothering your big brother!" This, pushing a smaller plate in front of Raghav, one also glistening with those idli, softer and brighter than the Johnson's Baby Powder Amma rubbed on him during summer months. Raghav would not be distracted, though his hands gravitated towards the idli – once, so difficult to come by; now, an almost-everyday luxury – and sambar. He resumed, but, heeding Madhav Chettan's condition, tried to decelerate the queries.

"When Kalyani tears, will it be in big bits or small bits – are they big enough to catch? How do you put her back together?"

"Why do you think Kalyani will tear into bits?"

"Appa said *She could tear like wet tissue, you have to be extremely careful around her, is that understood?*"

Madhav Chettan smiled at that, at the unconscious echoing of their father's clipped tones, "Appa's right, we all do – need to be extra careful. And *I'll* need paper and your crayons with a free hand and a full stomach to talk of wear and tear, so shall we finish eating first? Pankajakshi-amma might never make us idli again if we don't polish these off while they're hot."

He was as good as his word. As soon as Raghav had gobbled up the idli and drunk the mandatory glass of Horlicks, eyes screwed shut to speed the latter process, they settled down at the other end of the dining table, with the double-ringed 1977 diary that functioned as Raghav's Rough Notebook and his box of stubby crayons as required by Madhav Chettan.

"Do you remember the angel cake Amma used to buy for us, back in Wimbledon?"

Really? Sometimes, even Madhav Chettan could ask silly questions, just like an adult. *Remember* Angel Cake? How could he *ever* forget! It was what he missed the most after they left Wimbledon – well, one of the *five* things he missed the most. For a brief, delicious instant, memory sped back to their Saturday-evening treats after his mother returned from town with a boot full of all kinds of stuff – milk, rice, fish, toilet paper, more – and, unfailingly, Angel Cake. Triple-decker treat it was, a thick slab of white then yellow then pink all held together with thin layers of cream, and topped with a soft, light brown, crust. But why was Madhav Chettan talking of Angel Cake when he hadn't even been particularly fond of it? Raghav nodded.

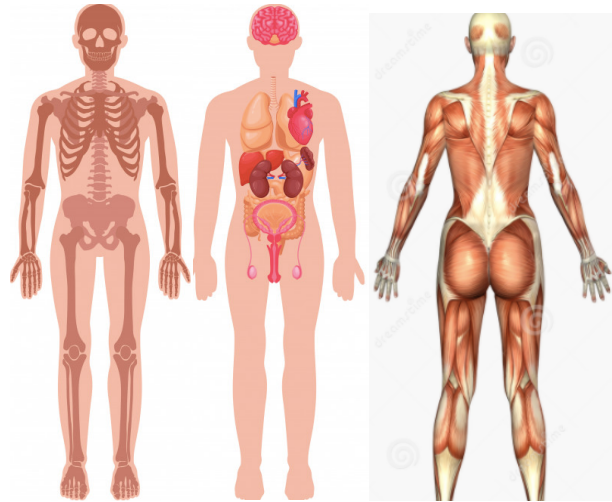
"So, we humans are built a little like angel cake, see?"

What? Now this was a surprise. "You mean, we taste good?"

"No, no, let's start over. Help me colour these."

Madhav Chettan tore out several sheets from the diary. On the first, he drew the outline of a person, then filled the inside with bones. "What colours will you choose?"

"HMMMMM, orange inside the lines then I'll leave the bones blank, so they look white like real skeletons!"



“Right, so the bones are the part that are deepest inside us, okay? Like the mang-a-ahndi that Keshav and you keep fighting over. They give us shape. We’d be like bathroom sponges without them.” Raghav looked at the drawing with fresh respect, the stone in the middle was his favourite part of the mango. Keshav Chettan – stronger, meaner aged twelve – usually won their duels, but there were days when Amoomma intervened and handed Raghav the coveted ahndi, which he would then suck at length, loudly, as much to protract the joy as to annoy Keshav Chettan.

As Raghav finished colouring the body, Madhav Chettan quickly sketched another humanoid, filled with lumps and bumps, balloon-like things some of which he recognised triumphantly from the charts and books littered around the house: “Heart! Brain! Huhmm, lungs! What’s that like a cycle pump?”

“That’s the stomach, kutta. Okay, you could say this is the second set of things inside our bodies. The ones you spotted, lungs, heart, brain. And kidneys, stomach, intestines, liver, pancreas... organs, all the things we need to keep breathing, speaking, thinking, peeing. Over to you! Paint on.”

Raghav, lips pursed in thought, picked crayons from his box. Red for the heart, blue for the brains, green for the lungs, maybe brown for the kidneys – and yellow for the stomach?

“Not bad, Leonardo!” Raghav glowed, though he was not sure who Leonardo was. Madhav Chettan’s approval was the best praise. “Now, we come to the almost-last bit. See this.”

The third figure – identical in size and shape to the other two, dissimilar otherwise – seemed made of woven thread or rope; it was chockablock with lines, thick and thin. There were also bulges here and there. Raghav squinted, “Why is he swollen?”

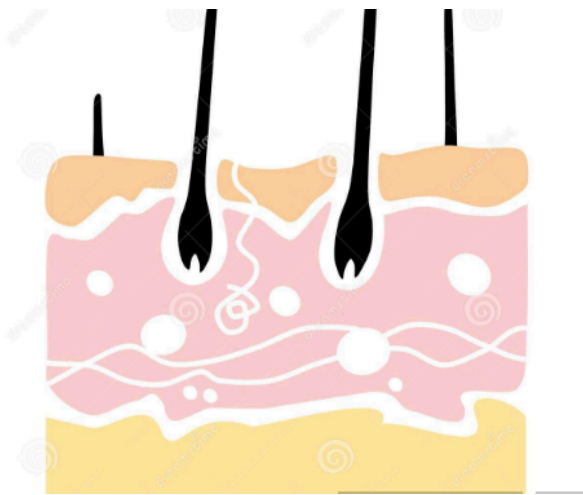
“He isn’t swollen! Those are muscles, they come over all those organs, and stretch across the whole body. That’s what helps us move. See, that muscle in the arm, when it tightens, you can lift your book. And when this one, in the thigh, does that, you get to kick a football. They stretch like elastic ropes, all through your body.”

Raghav ran his fingers down the page, convinced he could feel the ropes move. “Will you paint it for me?” He asked Madhav Chettan tentatively, unsure of which colours to pick, then watched as

Madhav Chettan thickened the threads with brown, till they seemed to jump out of the page, and shaded the rest of the body light yellow. “I have them too? Everywhere in my body?”

“Yes, you do, I do, and so does Pankajakshi-amma, who looks like she’s all bone. If we didn’t, we couldn’t move. Now, all the muscles, plus the organs, plus the bones deep within, are covered by our skin and tissues. You could say all of it is held safe by the skin. See: This.” Madhav Chettan retraced – with his HB pencil – the outlines on each of the three sketches till they glowed. Next, he made another drawing, this time in the diary instead of tearing a sheet, using the crayons directly: “And the skin, right, with the tissue underneath, is what looks just like an angel cake. The bit that comes just above the muscles is the yellow layer, we call it the hypodermis; then, the wide pink band, the dermis, and right on top, the orange stripe is the epidermis, which we can see — and touch.”

“And those black birthday candle-twigs?”



“That’s down. It’s the hair we all have on our skin, some people – especially when you’re young – hardly have any, some have a lot.”

“Like Amoomma has on her chin?”

“Don’t let her hear you! Yes, like Amoomma.”

“Now, each layer of the skin is attached to the one beneath – the orange stripe to the pink band, and that to the yellow one, which holds fast to the muscle. All together, they keep us whole, they protect everything inside, they tell us when it’s hot, or cold, or windy. But Kalyani’s orange stripe – her epidermis – isn’t fixed properly to the one underneath, it just tears really, really easily.”

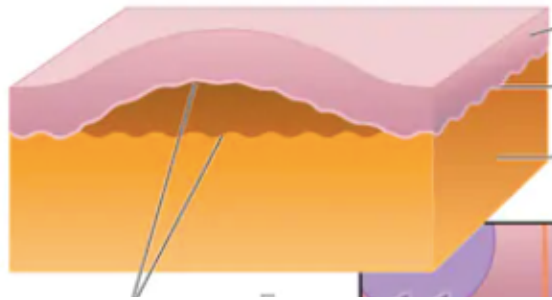
“Why?”

“We don’t know, kutta. You know how there’s cream in the angel cake between vanilla and strawberry? Maybe she doesn’t have enough of the cream-stuff, or maybe it isn’t strong enough to hold on to the orange stripe.”

“How does it tear, the p-der, p-derms? Doesn’t that hurt? Does she come apart? How do you join her back?”

“E-pi-derm-is. Remember the time you tugged at the cable of the iron, and it fell off the table on your arm?”

It had been the scariest thing, ever. Raghav still felt sick when he recalled the pain, the stench of his own skin, his left arm, his arm that – from elbow to wrist – had turned into a swarm of scarlet, angry boils, a strange new beast that he could not recognise, nor bring himself to touch. He had kept well away from irons since.



That would happen to Kalyani if she so much as knocked herself against a table or if Raghav grabbed her while playing catch, explained Madhav Chettan, deftly drawing another orange-and-pink cake, with the top stripe bulging, hanging loose from the lower layer: Her skin would either fill – like the top stripe – with fluid in bigger versions of his horrid, horrid burns, or turn into gashes like Keshav got on his back when he fell from the jackfruit tree last month. Suddenly, Raghav felt a swift and hard pinch on his palm.

“Aaaaaawwww.”

“That hurt, didn’t it? I am sorry. See, your skin is still fine. Hers won’t be. That’s why you have to be very, very careful.”

“Is Kalyani like Humpty Dumpty? How do you put her together again, when all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t help Humpty Dumpty?”

“No, no, I promise you she will **not** come apart. There’s still the rest of her inside – bones and organs and muscles – which stay in place. Humpty Dumpty didn’t have them. But germs could get into the tears, and cause an infection, which would make it much worse. That’s why the blisters and lesions have to be cleaned, and dressed, and medicated, to protect them and speed the healing.”

“Do you use glue?”

“No, glue is bad for wounds.”

“Why does she have so many colours on her right foot?”

“People have many colours inside. We have all these layers, and they look different, only we don’t always get to see them, right? But with Kalyani, we do – through the wounds, and when they heal, they also take on different colours, and they sometimes stay that way.”

Raghav now homed in on the pivotal, and enigmatic, subject of the nationality of feet and their relationship with gods, which had been nipping at his heels since the previous evening. Why, he demanded, did the Greeks choose Kalyani’s foot as a model for their gods? What feet did Madhav Chettan have, and, “What about me? Would my feet be ugly in Greece?”

“Your feet would be ugly in Greece, just like you, pazhanthuni!” That was Keshav Chettan, back home. Bother. You could hear him before you saw him. He galloped into the dining room – sweaty, starving, sour-tempered after his Saturday-morning music class with Missus Shastri –, hollering for breakfast to Pankajakshi-amma, flicking his snot-grey eraser at Raghav and throwing his satchel at the umbrella stand, all in one unbroken charge.

“And yours are ugly everywhere, Keshav. Now shut up before I throw you out of the window,” Madhav Chettan did not sound angry, but Keshav Chettan piped down for once, letting Pankajakshi-amma hector him into washing the street off his hands and face before the meal. Madhav Chettan continued doodling; three feet appeared in a trice. “Kalyani’s second toe is longer than her big toe – and in ancient Greece, sculptors would make the statues of their gods that way, they thought it represented perfection.”



“Your feet, like mine, are what are called Egyptian, Raghav: See, they’re beautifully symmetric.”

After breakfast, Raghav contemplated the top of his feet for an uninterrupted while, and concluded that Madhav Chettan was right.

Both were satisfactorily geometric, each with a long, solid, big toe and the others sloping away — forming a perfect angle, quite like one half of the hills he drew when homework seemed to expand on its own. His thoughts kept returning to the last nugget Madhav Chettan had dropped on the subject of Egyptian feet: that their owners made for great warriors. At least, that was what the ancient ones used to say.

Kalyani could keep her multicoloured feet. He’d rather be a famous general, with scores of soldiers to lead into battle and medals to pin to his chest, than the statue of a god. Statues had to stay still. Forever. He sighed at her fate.