

The Beginning of the Stories

Summer holidays! Ajji smiled to herself as she waited for two more of her grandchildren to arrive. Raghu and Meenu would be here soon. Anand and Krishna had already arrived with their mother the previous evening. They had been waiting restlessly for their cousins to arrive ever since. Even though Ajji told them Raghu and Meenu would be here the next morning, these two kids just would not listen. They went to the railway station with their grandfather, Ajja, to receive them. The train must have pulled into the tiny railway station of Shiggaon by now, and their grandfather would have hired a taxi to bring them home along with their mother and the stacks of luggage.

Ajji hurried through her bath. She had finished cooking their favourite dishes, and was now wearing a nice, soft cotton sari before going to the veranda to wait for them.

There! There they came! What a noise the children were making! They all nearly tumbled out of the car and came leaping and shouting to her, each wanting to be the first to be hugged by her. Each one wanted to be closest to Ajji.

Soon the children settled down. A visit to Ajji and Ajja's house meant first inspecting the garden to see how much the plants had grown since they last came. Then they went to check on the cows, calves, dog, pups, cats and kittens. Then they all ate huge quantities of Ajji's delicious food. Finally, while their mothers went off to chat and rest, the children gathered around their grandmother for the best part of the holidays—listening to her wonderful stories, particularly in the late afternoon.

Let us, too, gather under the fast revolving fan, on a mat on the floor, fighting to be nearest to her, and listen in.





'Doctor, Doctor'

The first day, the children asked, 'Ajji, how do you know so many stories?'

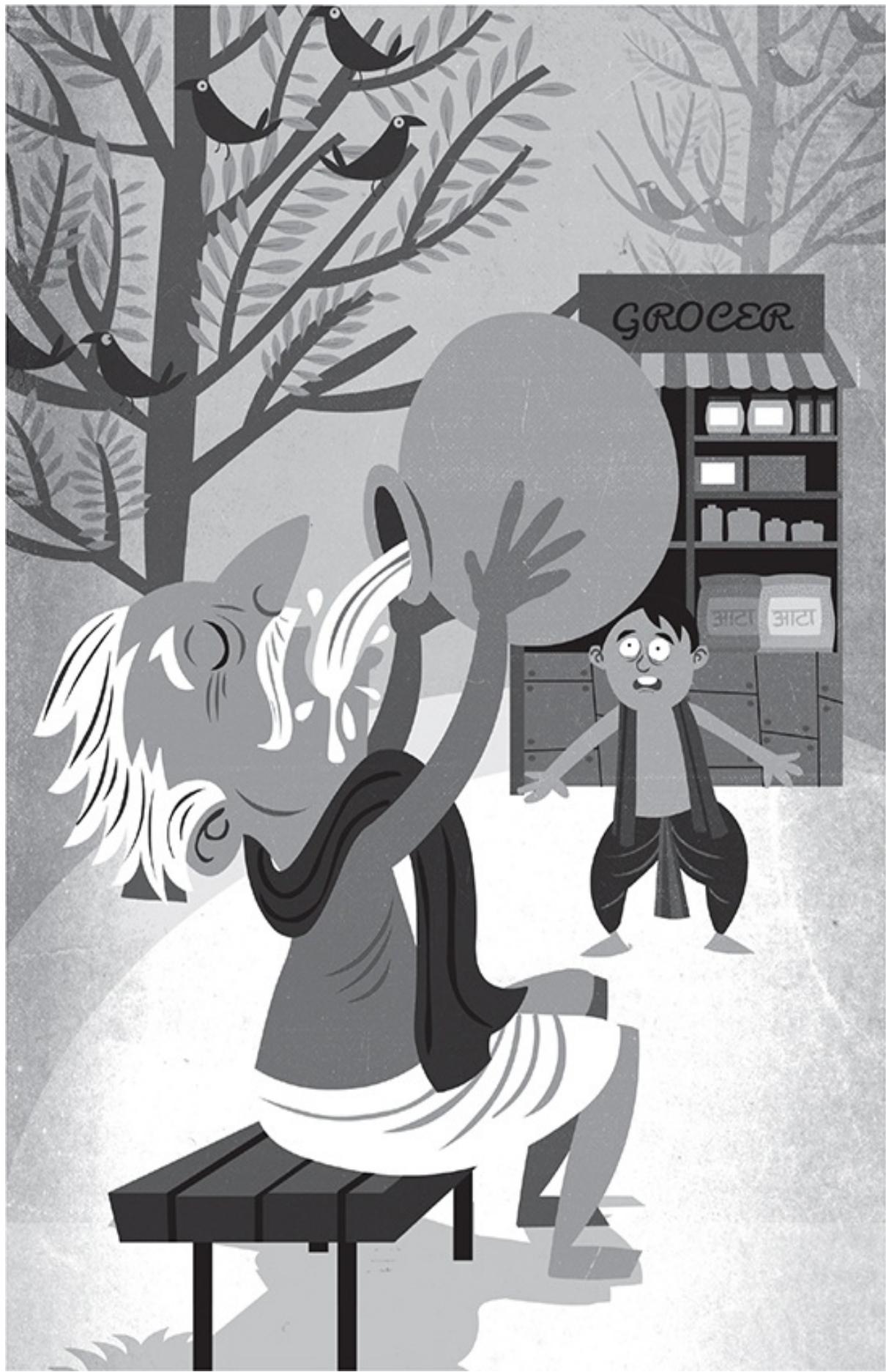
Ajji smiled and answered, 'My grandmother told me many stories. Some I read in books. A few I learnt from youngsters like you, and the rest from your Ajja.' Then Ajji paused and said, 'I see all of you have grown a lot since the last time I saw you. So before I start telling any stories, I want to know what each of you want to be when you grow up.'

Raghu, who was eleven years old, and the oldest of all, said immediately, 'I want to be an environment scientist.' Meenu, who was nine, said, 'I have not decided, maybe a computer person like my dad.' Anand, who was ten, said, 'I want to be an astronaut,' and his twin sister Krishna firmly said, 'I want to become a fashion designer.' Ajji smiled. 'I am glad all of you have thought about this. We should always have some aim in life which we must try to achieve while being of help to others. Now let me tell you a story of a person who learnt just such a lesson.'

Shall we, too, join Ajji and her gang of young friends and hear the story?

On a blazing hot summer afternoon, an old man came walking down a narrow village path. He was tired and thirsty. Right by the road, he spotted a tiny grocery store. It had a tin roof and mud walls. The shopkeeper sat inside fanning himself and shooing away the flies that were buzzing around in the stifling heat. There was a little bench in front of the store where the villagers met when evening came and the land had cooled down. The old man flopped

down on the bench. He was so tired that for a while he could not speak. Finally, he opened his mouth and uttered one word, ‘Water!’



Now, this village had been facing a horrible problem for a long time. It was near a great desert and the rains came only once a year to fill its ponds and wells. But the rains had disappeared for the last two years, and the villagers had been making do with water from a faraway stream. Every morning groups of men and women walked a long distance, filled their pots from the little stream and used that the whole day. Naturally, no one wanted to waste even a drop of this precious water.

Yet how do you say no to a thirsty, tired old man when he asks for water? Without a second thought, the shopkeeper, Ravi, who was very kindhearted, poured out a tumbler of water from his pot and gave it to the old man. The man drank it up greedily. Then he said one more word: 'More!' And without waiting for Ravi to give it to him, he lunged for the pot, picked it up and lifting it to his lips drank up Ravi's entire day's supply of water!

Poor Ravi, what could he do? He just stared in dismay. Then he told himself, 'Never mind. After all, I did help someone in need.'

The stranger, meanwhile, now seemed to feel better. He handed the pot back to Ravi, gave a smile that filled Ravi's heart with warmth and said, 'My son, always be kind like this. Help everyone who comes to you like you helped me, and you will be blessed.' Then he picked up his stick and slowly hobbled down the road. Ravi watched the strange old man disappear into the distance, then returned to his shop.

The afternoon heat grew worse. After a while Ravi felt his head was about to burst with a headache. His lips were parched and his throat hurt, it was so dry. He really needed a drink of water. But the visitor had finished it all up! Hoping to coax a drop or two out of the pot, Ravi lifted it to his lips and tilted it. Imagine his surprise when a gush of water ran down his face! It was sweet, refreshing water which not only quenched his thirst, but wiped out his headache too.

Ravi was staring at the water pot, trying to figure out what had just happened, when Karim limped into his shop. Karim was a young man who had hurt his leg in an accident many years ago which had left him with a limp. When he was unwell or tired, his limp became worse. Karim, too, flopped down on the bench in front of the store and caught his breath, like the old man. Then he fished out a shopping list from his pocket and handed it to Ravi. As Ravi started packing up the items listed on the paper, Karim opened a little bundle of food and ate his lunch sitting on the bench. Finally he wiped his

mouth on his scarf and pointed to Ravi's pot of water. 'Mind if I take a little sip? It is so hot after all.'

Ravi was busy measuring out some dal. He said without looking up, 'I would be happy to offer you some, but someone's already had most of it. Then I was feeling unwell and I think I finished the last of it.'

'What are you saying, my friend? I can clearly see the pot brimming over with water!'

Ravi looked up and stared in disbelief. In front of his eyes, Karim poured out a tumblerful of water and drank it. Then he paid for all his groceries and left the store.

Did his limp look as if it was nearly gone? Ravi watched him for a while trying to figure out, then decided the heat was playing tricks on his mind and went back into the cool comfort of his shop and dozed off.

He woke with a start as someone was calling his name urgently. He opened his eyes to find Karim back. This time he was holding by the hand his little sister Fatima. 'Brother, wake up. We need your help,' Karim urged.

'Wh-what? Is something wrong?'

'Fatima is burning up with fever!'

'Then go to a doctor, why have you got her to a grocery shop?'

Karim stared at him and said, 'You mean you don't know how you just helped me? My leg, which has been troubling me for the last many years, healed up on its own as soon as I drank the water from your magic pitcher! Give Fatima a drink from it, too. I am sure her fever will disappear in no time.'

Ravi was astounded. Magic pitcher? Healing water? What was Karim going on about? Nonetheless he passed the pot to Fatima. She drank a bit, then sat down to rest. Within minutes she lifted her head and said, 'It is true, brothers! I am indeed cured of the fever!'

Soon the news spread in the village like wildfire. Ravi, the quiet, kind grocery storekeeper, was now the owner of a magic pitcher, the waters from which could heal anyone of any disease. Every night Ravi left the pitcher in the store, and in the morning it would be filled to the brim with sweet, cool water. Daily, a queue of sick people and their relatives collected in front of his shop. To each one Ravi gave a drink of the water, and they went away saying they were now better. The pot was never empty. Ravi realized the old man he had helped must have given him this gift in gratitude. Ravi understood what a great gift it was and thanked him daily in his mind.

Soon his little store turned into a hospital. Ravi did not charge a paisa for the water. People would leave some money, some gifts for him, and others did not pay him anything but he was still happy with that.

One day, a rich landlord's servant appeared at his doorstep and said, 'My master is unwell. Come with me and give him a drink of your water.'

Ravi replied, 'See the crowd of people behind you, waiting for their turn. How can I leave without helping them and go to your master? Do you think these sick people can stand in the sun for long? Tell your master to come to me instead and I will give him the water here.'

The servant said, 'Ravi, what will you get by helping these poor people? A few rupees? Some rice and dal? Come to my master's house. He will shower you with money and gifts. Your worries about making ends meet will be over for at least a month.'

Ravi was tempted. It was true, why not cure one rich man and get some help in buying his daily needs? Ravi told the people waiting outside to come back the next day and went with the servant to the landlord.

Slowly, in this way, Ravi changed. Where once he could not bear to see the pain and sadness of the sick and poor people, he now started each day hoping he would get one rich patient at least, who would pay him handsomely.

Days passed thus. Seasons changed and it was summer once more. Ravi was in his old store, writing up his accounts, when the voice of an old man quavered in his ear, 'Son, water!'

Startled, he looked up. Was it the same old man who had given him the gift of the magic pitcher? But right behind the visitor was none other than the king's messenger. 'Come quickly!' the messenger shouted. 'The queen has been bitten by a mosquito!'

'Water!' the old man repeated.

'The queen is unwell!' the messenger shouted again.

Ravi looked from one to the other. One was a grubby old man who may or may not be the same person who gave him the pitcher. On the other side a messenger from the king himself! He pictured the gold coins showering down on him once his healing water soothed the queen's mosquito bites. The choice was clear.

He picked up his pitcher and said to the stranger, 'Wait right here, Uncle, I'll be back soon.'

The king's swift-footed horses took him to the palace. There he rushed to the queen who was staring in dismay at the mosquito bites on her arm. He

tilted the pitcher to pour some water into a tumbler, but nothing came! Again and again he tilted the pitcher. He turned it upside down and stared into its depths. It was dry as a bone.

‘You cheat!’ the king roared. ‘So this is how you have been fooling the people of my kingdom! Get out, and never let me hear that you have acquired magical healing powers. If you claim such a thing again I will banish you forever from the village.’ Then he turned to comfort his queen who was splashing tears on the bump on her arm.

Ravi slowly walked back to his village. He went to his shop. No one was there. He searched for the old man who had asked for water. He was nowhere to be seen. He called out, ‘Uncle, I am sorry. I made a mistake. Please do come. I will give you water.’ But there was no reply. Now he realized this was the same old man whom he met a year back.

He remembered the people he had healed once out of kindness and compassion and how much they had blessed and loved him in return. He remembered their little acts of generosity, sparing him a few coins, a bundle of vegetables from their garden in return for the water. When did he become so selfish and greedy that he would neglect the people who had needed him the most? The old man had taken back his powers when he sensed Ravi had misused the gift.

Never mind, Ravi smiled to himself. He would use the money he had received for the water to help bring a real doctor to the village, someone who would help the people with his knowledge of medicines and diseases, so that they need not wait for a magician to cure them of their illnesses.

From that day onwards Ravi filled his pitcher with ordinary water from the stream and carried it back carefully to his little store and waited for the old man. Maybe one day he would be back, but till then, Ravi was determined to bring a real medicine man to his village.



Ajji finished her story and looked around at the four little faces around her. Raghu was deep in thought. Ajji smiled at him. Then the children shouted, ‘Ajji, tell one more story!’

‘Ah ha,’ Ajji said, ‘too many stories a day are not good either. One laddoo is very sweet, very delicious but if you eat laddoos all the time it’s no fun. Go

and play outside. Tomorrow I will tell you another story.' With that she got up and went to the kitchen to supervise the dinner.



Kavery and the Thief

The children had gone with their Ajja to the paddy fields that morning. They were all city kids and did not know a thing about farming! On the way, Anand was surprised to see a bird's nest on top of the tree. He said to Ajja, 'I wonder how birds decide where and how to make their nests!' Ajja said, 'The straw in the nest is from the paddy field. Do you know, farming helps human beings as well as birds?' Krishna replied, 'Ajja, I thought wheat and rice can be just plucked from trees, like mangoes. But today I realized there is so much work in farming.'

That afternoon, after lunch, when they gathered around Ajji for the day's story, she looked sharply at the children. They had enjoyed learning about farming activities like cleaning seeds and separating the straw from paddy. In the city everything came from the supermarket, but here they had seen how things were really produced.

Ajji said, 'Farming is very important. If farmers do not grow any food, what will we all eat?'

Anand said thoughtfully, 'If farmers do such important work, why are they so poor?'

'That's true, my dear,' Ajji sighed, fanning herself. 'Of course there are rich farmers too, people who own lots of land. But many in our country till small pieces of land, and so make less money.'

Then seeing the kids' crestfallen faces, she put down her fan, sat up and said, 'But I can tell you of a poor farmer woman who did not remain very poor. All due to her sharp wit!'

‘Tell Ajji! Do tell!’ the kids yelled. So Ajji started her story.

Kavery’s lazy husband annoyed her no end. There she was working like a donkey in the fields, ploughing and watering and tending a hard, dry piece of land, while her husband snored away happily at home! Why, once when a stranger came asking for some food and water, he just pointed towards the kitchen and went back to sleep. The stranger, thankfully, was an honest man and took only enough for himself and his horse. Not that there was much to steal in Kavery’s little house. They were poor farmers with only a patch of land where nothing seemed to grow. Somehow Kavery tilled the land, did some odd jobs in the neighbourhood, and made ends meet.

The land was right next to a temple. On some days her husband would come along with her on the pretext of helping her, but no sooner would her back be turned than she would find him stretched out near the temple courtyard gossiping with passing villagers.

One day, as she was working in the field, trying to dig up the ground so she could sow some seeds, a thin man with a big moustache appeared beside her. He was a thief, and up to no good. Kavery, of course, did not know this. She greeted him politely and went back to her work. Now the thief wanted to steal the coins that were given as offerings in the temple and perhaps even the ornaments on the idol. The only way into the temple was by digging his way in from Kavery’s land. But how could he do anything there, with this tough, no-nonsense woman working away?

Guessing Kavery was hard up for money, he whispered to her, ‘Sister, why are you working so hard on this barren land? I will give you one thousand rupees, sell it to me.’

Kavery raised her eyebrows; why did he want to buy the land for so much money? Surely something was wrong . . .

The thief sensed she was not about to sell it to him, so he raised his price: ‘A thousand and fifty? No? Two thousand? No again? FIVE THOUSAND? No?’

Kavery kept shaking her head. She did not like this odd-looking man who was offering her so much money for the field. Clearly he had some evil plans. Finally, to keep him quiet, she made up a story. ‘I will never sell this land. You see, it belonged to my ancestors. Now we are poor, but I am told that once our family was very rich. Though we lost a lot of our money, much of it

was also buried here, in this field by one ancestor, to keep it safe from robbers. Then people forgot about it for years and years. My husband found a clue to the location of the hidden treasure just a few days back. Why do you think I am digging this hard earth? Not to sow seeds, oh no, that's just what everyone thinks. I am actually looking for hidden treasure!'

The thief was stunned. He felt this woman was really innocent, giving such important information to a stranger. He thought, why should I not take advantage of this situation? Here he was, hoping to steal a few coins from the temple, and this woman was telling him about hidden treasure! He replied in a very humble way, 'Yes sister, I understand; after all it is your family treasure. Only you should get it.' He pretended to walk away, and went and hid himself a little way down the road.

Night fell; Kavery packed up her tools and headed home. The temple, too, emptied out and the priest locked it up for the night. Then at midnight, when all was quiet and the night creatures were coming out of their homes, the thief crept into the field.

All night he dug and dug, looking for treasure, but of course there was no sign of it as there never had been any treasure to begin with! By the time dawn broke he realized Kavery had made a fool of him and all he could do now was get away from the field fast.

When Kavery reached the field she grinned to herself. Just as she had expected, the thief had spent the night digging up the land nicely for her. All she needed to do now was sow the seeds. She worked hard in the field for the next few months and managed to grow a good crop. She sold those and finally they had some money. With a part of this money Kavery bought some jewellery.



Many months later, the thief decided to show his face in the village again. He was careful to disguise himself, though. He trimmed his long moustaches, tied a colourful turban and pretended to be a travelling salesman. No sooner had he stepped into the village than he saw Kavery going about her work. But what is this . . . Instead of the simple, unadorned lady he saw last year, she was now wearing jewellery which looked as though it had been in the family for years! Surely she must have located that missing treasure finally! He was determined to look in her house and find the rest of her money and treasure.

That night, he appeared at Kavery's house and said to her husband, 'I am a traveller and don't have a place to spend the night. Please give me shelter for the night.'

Kavery's husband agreed immediately. Kavery, however, glimpsed the man from inside the house and saw through his disguise. She knew he must be planning some robbery, so she said in a loud voice, making sure the visitor heard her, 'Oh dear, your dear aunt is all alone at night and has asked us to come stay with her. You know how the dark scares her when your uncle is not there. Come, let us go there for the night.' Then lowering her voice a bit, yet making sure she was heard clearly, she continued, 'Don't worry about the jewels. I have hidden them in little holes in the house walls. No one will suspect the hiding spot.' Then she came out and in her normal voice told the thief, 'Brother, you can sleep in the veranda. The house will be locked. Here is some food and water for you. We will come tomorrow morning.' The thief smiled to himself at Kavery's foolishness.

Her husband, meanwhile, stared at her with an open mouth, wondering which aunt and what jewels she was talking about. When she firmly walked off, he followed obediently.

The thief could not believe his luck. He had the entire night to comb through the house, tap all the walls and look for the hidden stash of gold ornaments. So he started. Tap tap tap. Kick, punch and shove. He prowled and he tapped, he kicked and he pushed the walls, hoping to spot the jewels. Finally he tore down all the walls. But, of course, there was nothing he could find. Exhausted he fell asleep and woke only with the crowing of the cock as the sun rose. Quickly he found his little bundle of things and ran off. Within minutes Kavery and her husband returned.

'Oh Kavery, see what the bad man has done to our house! You gave him food and shelter and made me come with you leaving the man alone in the night,' her husband wailed. But Kavery was smiling! Then she broke into

peals of laughter and said, ‘Don’t worry. I had planned this all along. You see, I saved money from our last crop to rebuild the house. I needed to call in some labourers to help tear it down, but our guest has done it for us! Now we can make a larger house for ourselves, just the way we always wanted.’

The whole village heard the story and started marvelling at her intelligence. Many months flew by. The thief was burning to take revenge. How dare that village woman trick him, that too not once but twice! He realized that she was very clever.

One day, he dressed up as a bangle seller and started wandering in the village. Kavery spotted him and knew who he was at once. She said to her friends who were crowding around the bangle seller, ‘Oh dear, I would have loved to get some for myself. But ever since that good-for-nothing thief tried to steal all our money by tearing down our house, I have hidden everything in a little hole in a tree in the woods.’

‘Which tree?’ her friends asked.

‘Oh no, I am not saying which tree, but it is at last safe and sound out in the forest.’

The thief looked at her. Yes Kavery was wearing an ordinary sari with no ornaments at all.

Her friends turned around in astonishment at the crash with which the bangle seller flung down his collection of bangles and made off for the forest. Only Kavery watched with a grin on her face.

Out in the forest, the thief searched high and low for the jewels. He climbed trees, poked around in bushes, got bitten, scratched and growled at, but he would not give up. The jewels were there somewhere and he had to find them.

So that is where we will leave him, prowling around in the forest, looking for money and gold that don’t belong to him. Everyone praised Kavery for her quick wit in ridding the village of the thief. She continued to work hard and made more money from her farming and became a rich old lady. Even her husband was shamed into giving up his lazy ways and helping her. As for the thief, who knows, perhaps he is still in that forest, looking for what was never his. Now if only he had learnt to work hard like Kavery—he would have been as rich!

The children laughed and laughed when the story was over. ‘The poor thief!’ Meenu and Krishna giggled. ‘Maybe he got eaten by a tiger!’

Ajji grinned. ‘See,’ she told Anand, ‘sometimes with a bit of luck and lots of pluck, people can change any situation in which they find themselves!’