



Behind the Lie

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Level 4



As soon as their father left for work, Ramesh swept up the broken glass while Valli made tea.



Though she was only eight years old, she had already learnt how to make the strong, sweet tea that their mother liked. In between sips, Amma held the warm glass to her throbbing forehead. And to her swollen cheek.

I fell. I tripped. The glass shattered when I dropped it.

These were Amma's usual excuses. And no one looked beyond what she said. Not even when the children started repeating the lies.



“Buying bread for the third day in a row?” asked Murugan, the owner of the neighbourhood store.

There weren't many customers at his store that morning so he chatted with Valli as he entered her purchases into his account book.

"If your Amma is still not well enough to cook, don't you think you should take her to the doctor?"

"It's not that kind of illness, Murugan anna," Valli sighed.

"What kind of illness is it, then?" Murugan persisted.

"Just that her arm is hurting very badly. Because she tripped on the road and fell straight on her shoulder," Valli repeated her mother's lie.

But her eyes told another story. And though she avoided Murugan's eyes, he felt very uneasy. Something was not right.

He discussed it with his wife, Sarasa, later that evening and was shocked to hear the truth about Valli's mother, Meenakshi.



“It’s not tripping or falling. It’s her monster of a husband. Looks like he wouldn’t hurt a fly! But that’s just a mask. Poor Meenakshi — she puts up with all his blows and beatings to protect the children.”

Murugan was very upset. "I didn't know this. Why didn't you tell me earlier? We should have done something."

After all, both families had lived on the same street for years. It wasn't right that Meenakshi and her children should suffer like this.

"You mean you've never noticed?" Sarasa was surprised, "Meenakshi's bruises? The cut lip some weeks ago? It breaks my heart," she sighed. "But what can we do? Interfering might only make things worse."

Murugan wondered how he could help without making things worse for Meenakshi and her children. He thought about it deeply before coming up with a plan.

The help Murugan arranged arrived at Valli's door some days later. It came wearing a wide smile a khaki police uniform.



"I'm Sub Inspector Jaya," the young policewoman introduced herself. "My uncle, Murugan maama, asked me to visit you. I got off duty early today, so I stopped here on my way home."



Luckily for Valli and her family, Appa was travelling on work. When their father was at home, the three of them lived under a cloud of fear, always scared about doing something that could set off his violent temper.

“Don’t make Appa angry,” Meenakshi would beg her children every day.

“No singing, Ramesh. Please! Don’t bounce that ball, Valli.”

SI Jaya listened patiently when the children told her all of this. Then she and Amma spoke in low voices for a long time while the children did their homework.

When it was time to leave, Jaya insisted that they note down her mobile number. "You can call me any time. Day or night. And if I can't come myself, I'll have the beat policeman at your door in minutes," she promised.

"But I don't have a phone," Amma pointed out, "My husband refuses to let me have one."





Jaya made Amma write down her number anyway.

"This terrible situation is not your fault," were her parting words to them as she got onto her bike. "This violence is not okay. And the three of you should never suffer in silence thinking it is normal. Meenakshi, you must think about what we've discussed and do some of the things I've suggested."



After she left, Valli asked Amma what Jaya meant.

“The SI wants me to write to someone in our family telling them how things are. She says we should not keep hiding our problem. That we should share our problem with people who care for us. She also said I could file a complaint at our Police Station if I wanted. But I don’t know what to do. Will any of this really help us?”



Ramesh nodded gloomily. He was moody, and suspicious of everyone these days. More so ever since he too had become the target of Appa's anger whenever he rushed to help Amma.

"The SI wouldn't have given us her personal number anyway. Try calling that number," he challenged his mother and sister bitterly. "I bet you a full bar of chocolate that you'll just get a recorded message. Or no one will answer."

"Let's write to someone first then. Why not write to Paati?" Valli knew Appa was a little scared of his mother.



It took a few days, but Amma did finally write to Paati. Then, they all waited eagerly for a reply.

A visit from Paati would be nice. She was strict with them but what fun they had when she visited, bringing tins of home-made snacks with her.



She would braid Valli's hair in a new way each day and play cricket with them in the tiny lane. Amma would join them sometimes. Paati and Ramesh would sing together at home, and though Appa would look very irritated, he would control his temper while Paati was there.

Yes, their grandmother would tell Appa that his violence was not acceptable.

But when two weeks passed with no answer from Paati, all three grew downcast. What could they do next, they wondered sadly.

Appa had been travelling and when he returned, he had some news for them.

“My mother called me a few days ago,” he said gruffly. “She’s arriving here tomorrow. She wants to stay a few months. Months! I can’t understand why. Here...” he flung some money on the kitchen counter. “Pay the bill at the store and don’t forget to buy my mother’s special brand of coffee when you buy provisions for the month.”

As soon as he left, slamming the door angrily behind him, the children jumped with excitement.

“Give us a little of that money to buy sweets, Amma!” Ramesh pleaded. Amma agreed. More rare than the money she gave each of them was the half-smile on her face.





On their way to school, Valli made Ramesh stop at Murugan's store. After SI Jaya's visit to their home, Murugan made it a point to talk to the children whenever he could. He was busy when they entered the store, so Valli prodded Ramesh to the place where the sweets were displayed.

“You had better buy me that full bar of chocolate before you spend your money on anything else,” she demanded, “because I am surely going to win the bet.”

It took Ramesh a minute to remember the bet he had made the day SI Jaya had visited. He laughed and told his sister to hurry up. When Valli had chosen what she wanted, she went up to Murugan and asked whether she could make a call from his phone. She dialed Jaya’s number.

“Yes, Murugan maama,” answered a familiar voice at the other end.



Valli wiggled her thumb at Ramesh. So much for him thinking that the policewoman wouldn't answer their call.





"Jaya akka, it's me. Valli."

"Is everything alright, Valli? Do you need help?" Jaya sounded concerned.

"We're fine, akka. I just called to tell you that my Paati is coming to stay with us for a few months because Amma wrote telling her about Appa. And... how bad things were."

"That's such good news! And now you also know how to reach me, right? You can call me any time for help."



The call over and Murugan's many questions answered, the children started unwrapping their chocolate as they left the store.

Valli's heart felt lighter. Not just because of the chocolate they were sharing. Not even because of the whole extra bar she had won from her brother.



But because, for the first time in months, she could hear Ramesh singing softly to himself as they walked to school.



How children can cope with violence in the home

Children who live with an abusive or violent parent often feel scared or angry or ashamed. This is only natural. If you know anyone in this situation, let them know that:

No one should suffer violence in silence. All children and adults have the right to live in safety, especially within their home.

The violence is never the child's fault. The child's actions or behaviour does not cause the violence.

Violence in the home is a crime. In India, the law provides protection to children and women once the crime is reported. Those found guilty of the crime will be punished.





When children cannot act on their own to report abuse, their friends and classmates can help by:

Suggesting they share the problem with trusted people and following up until they do. Trusted adults could be grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbours, school principal.

Discussing the problem with their own parents and seeking their help.

Calling for help on their behalf if required.
Call 1098. This is CHILDLINE, the 24-hour helpline which can be dialled from any part of India by any child or adult. It provides immediate help to children seeking protection from child abuse, violence against a parent at home or any crime against children.

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Behind the Lie

(English)

Valli and Ramesh live under a cloud of fear because of their father, who has a frightening temper. Will things ever change for them? A story about domestic violence, grit and hope.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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