moon in the pot

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Moon in the Pot

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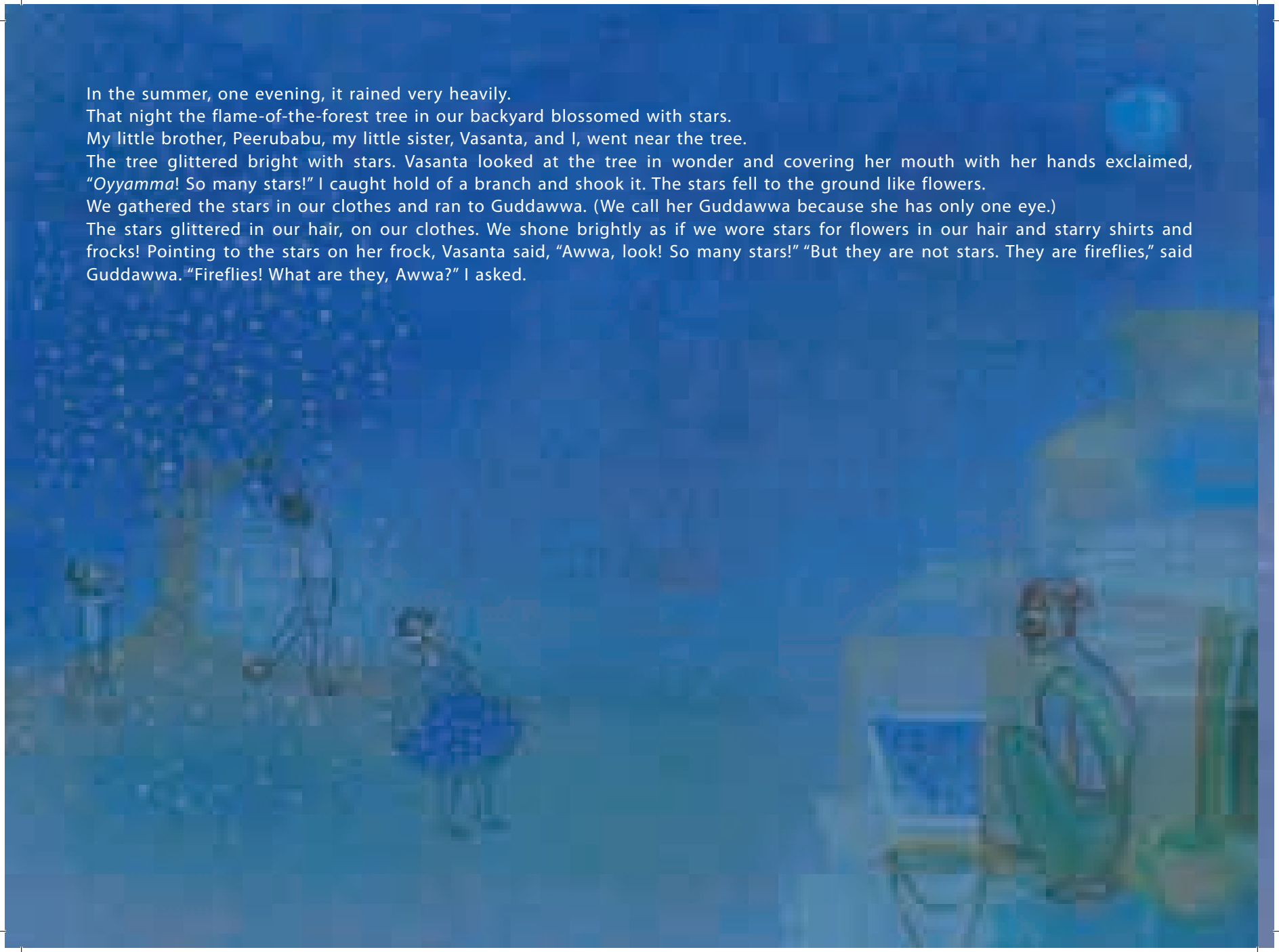
Series Editor
Deepa Sreenivas

Guddawwa took the moon out of the pot hanging from the roof and hung it up in the sky.
Moonlight rained heavily everywhere.

Golden moonlight on the milky mountain
Moist moonlight on the rocks and boulders
Silver moonlight shimmering on the waves of the lake's sweet water
Ripe moonlight on the fresh green fields
Tender-shoot moonlight on the tamarind trees
Milky moonlight on the white wings of the crane
The whole village rocked gently on the moonlight swing hanging from the sky.

Tonight Guddawwa will once again put away the moon in the pot hanging from the roof. I'll wake up before she does and steal the moon from the pot and hide it away somewhere. Let's see what she does then! Everyday she promises to give it to me but never does!



In the summer, one evening, it rained very heavily.
That night the flame-of-the-forest tree in our backyard blossomed with stars.
My little brother, Peerubabu, my little sister, Vasanta, and I, went near the tree.
The tree glittered bright with stars. Vasanta looked at the tree in wonder and covering her mouth with her hands exclaimed, "*Oyyamma*! So many stars!" I caught hold of a branch and shook it. The stars fell to the ground like flowers.
We gathered the stars in our clothes and ran to Guddawwa. (We call her Guddawwa because she has only one eye.)
The stars glittered in our hair, on our clothes. We shone brightly as if we wore stars for flowers in our hair and starry shirts and frocks! Pointing to the stars on her frock, Vasanta said, "Awwa, look! So many stars!" "But they are not stars. They are fireflies," said Guddawwa. "Fireflies! What are they, Awwa?" I asked.

“Come sit close to me. I’ll tell you,” said Guddawwa. We all sat near her.

We threw the fireflies into the air and they landed on grandmother’s saree drying on the clothesline. Guddawwa began telling us the story of fireflies.

“As the moon endlessly rubs against the sky, chaff falls to the ground. These fireflies are nothing but that chaff.”

“Once a bunch of golden sparrows went to heaven and appealed to God. You know what they said? They said, ‘Oh mighty God! At night, human beings light lamps in their houses; cobras have a shining jewel on their heads; the bulging eyes of owls serve them as lamps but our nests are full of darkness. What should we light our nests with? We have babies and young children. Take pity on us!” God was moved by their piteous pleas. He said, “The Moon has been rubbing against the sky for so long. There is all this moon chaff. You can gather it and line your nests. You will have your light then.”

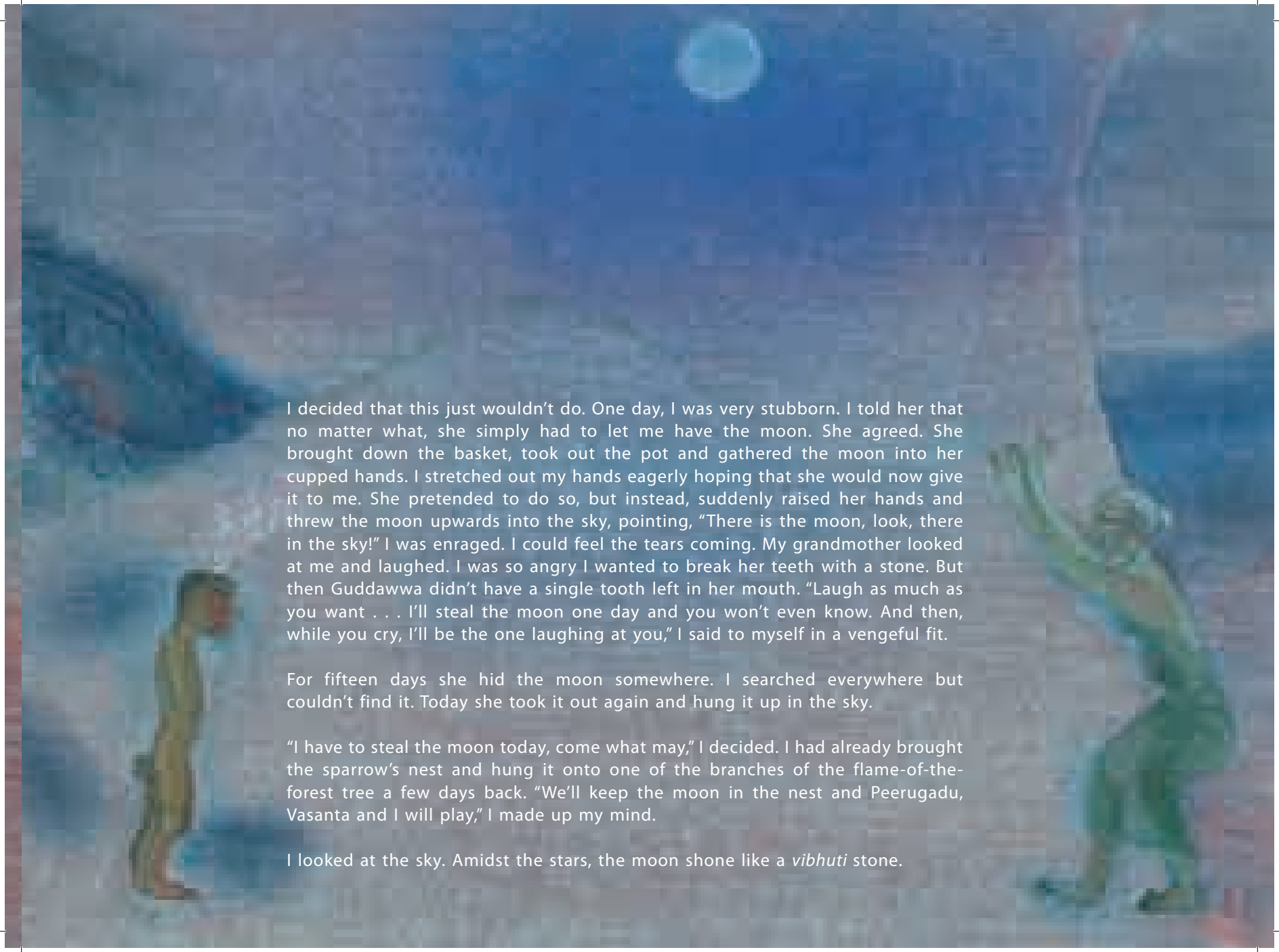
“Since then, the sparrows always plaster their nests with soft mud to stick moon chaff. So, the lamps inside the golden sparrows’ nests are these fireflies,” said Guddawwa.

I began to think . . . if moon chaff can give so much light, how much more light can the moon give! How nice it would be if I could get a piece of the moon and stick it inside a golden sparrow's nest!

One evening, as I lay with my head on Guddawwa's lap, I pointed to the moon in the sky and asked her, "Awwa, I want the moon. Will you get it for me?" "Why do you want it, son?" she asked. "I want to play with it. I will fetch a golden sparrow's nest and place the moon inside and my brother, sister and I will play with it," I replied. "Okay, I'll give it to you in the morning," she said. "No, I want it right now!" I cried. "But if I give it to you now, won't the whole world become dark? I promise I'll give it to you in the morning," said Awwa.

Next morning, as soon as I woke up, I ran to her, "Awwa, where have you kept the moon?" She nodded at me and said, "Look over there—that rope basket with a pot in it. I have put the moon inside that pot. If I take it out now, it will melt in the heat. I'll give it to you at night."

If I ask her at night, she says she'll give it in the morning and when I ask again in the morning she says she'll give it at night.



I decided that this just wouldn't do. One day, I was very stubborn. I told her that no matter what, she simply had to let me have the moon. She agreed. She brought down the basket, took out the pot and gathered the moon into her cupped hands. I stretched out my hands eagerly hoping that she would now give it to me. She pretended to do so, but instead, suddenly raised her hands and threw the moon upwards into the sky, pointing, "There is the moon, look, there in the sky!" I was enraged. I could feel the tears coming. My grandmother looked at me and laughed. I was so angry I wanted to break her teeth with a stone. But then Guddawwa didn't have a single tooth left in her mouth. "Laugh as much as you want . . . I'll steal the moon one day and you won't even know. And then, while you cry, I'll be the one laughing at you," I said to myself in a vengeful fit.

For fifteen days she hid the moon somewhere. I searched everywhere but couldn't find it. Today she took it out again and hung it up in the sky.

"I have to steal the moon today, come what may," I decided. I had already brought the sparrow's nest and hung it onto one of the branches of the flame-of-the-forest tree a few days back. "We'll keep the moon in the nest and Peerugadu, Vasanta and I will play," I made up my mind.

I looked at the sky. Amidst the stars, the moon shone like a *vibhuti* stone.

All children love Guddawwa. As for her, we are as dear to her as life itself.

She tells us many stories; makes us things to eat; teaches us new games. She teaches the girls to draw colorful *rangoli* designs; to make garlands with flowers and to braid their hair into nice-looking plaits.

As she tells her stories . . .
She pokes the clouds with her staff and they burst into rain.
Sometimes she conjures intensely hot summers.
Seas go into high tide.
Trees bloom and flowers blossom.
The Maya Fakir crosses the seven seas in one stride.

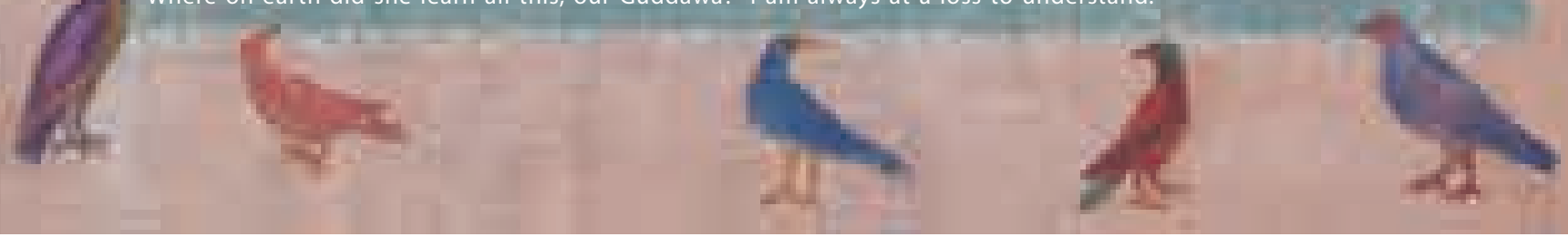
One day, she told us, she tied the seven seas together with a strand of her hair, brought them home and emptied them into our well.

At first, I didn't believe her. "I swear on the tender green leaf," she said, "If you don't believe me, here, drink this water from the well and tell me if it is not salty." I did that. The water was so unbearably salty that I had to spit it out. "Alright, I believe you," I said screwing up my face. She pulled me to her and ruffled my hair. "What a simpleton my grandson is!" she said and kissed me. I believed her but my sister and brother didn't. They don't get fooled by her tricks.

The *rakshasa*s come yelling and shouting towards her, but one look at the walking staff in Guddawwa's hands and they turn around and flee for their lives!
The *devas*, on the other hand, invite her to heaven and seat her on a throne that is just like God's.
Even the Gods request her to tell them tales.
When our Guddawwa tells stories, birds and beasts forget themselves and nod as they listen.
With the silver-plated staff in her hands, she sometimes looks like a sorceress.
The staff becomes a club
Becomes arrow
Becomes sickle
Becomes flute

Oh, how she plays with that little stick and how wondrously she tells her tales! What magic and illusions she weaves with her wand!

"Where on earth did she learn all this, our Guddawa?" I am always at a loss to understand.



But our story-telling Awwa's life is a mighty sad story.

Guddawwa is the wife of my grandfather's elder brother, Padamata Chengayya. She was also my mother's maternal aunt. Guddawwa was after all my grandfather's sister's daughter. She was not from our Yalamanda village. She was from Arepally Rangmapet near Tirupati. Our Chengayya thatha married her and went to stay in his in-laws' house. There, he did farming on leased agricultural land.

When she was very young, Guddawwa developed a cataract in her left eye. One *kamma* woman living in Naravallapalle village said that she could remove that extra layer from the eye-ball with a paddy stalk. In the process she cut out the whole eyeball. And that's how our Awwa became blind in one eye.

Since then people forgot her real name—Ijjilachimi—and began to call her the blind one, "O Guddidana!" She suffered a lot after marrying my elder grandfather. He was known for his short temper. He used to beat her a lot, and how! You know the whip that is used on the bullocks! He would beat her with that whip. Quarreling and fighting like this, she even had a son by him. But after some time, our grandfather married a second time and brought his new wife home. Even the thought of his son didn't stop him. Guddawwa couldn't take this. She picked up her baby and left for the seven hills in Tirupati where her brother, my mother's father, had a job carrying the idols during ceremonial processions in the temple.

With her year-old son tied to her back, she carried bricks when the Pedda Jeeyangar Mutt and the Mysore Mutt were being constructed. For a while she worked as a sweeper in a choultry run by *Vysyas*. For some time, she used to supply hot water to pilgrims. She bore such hardships on the Tirumala Hills. But to what end? Her son went back to his father once he was old enough to do so. He got married and had children of his own. But Guddawwa continued to stay on top of the hill. Neither her husband nor her son cared for her; why, not even her own brother looked after her. When she was young and was earning money, they all wanted her money; but in her old age, no one spared her a thought.

It was then that my father extended a helping hand. He brought her to our village. Under the eucalyptus tree, he built a hut for her. My mother treated her well as she was her aunt too.

You know, even at this age, she never sits idle. She makes laddus out of fried *channa* and jaggery, carries them in a basket, sits in front of our school and sells them to the children. When the school closes, she carries her basket to the Muslim *basti* near the bus stand. She works till late in the evening to earn her keep so she doesn't have to depend on our father.

This is the story of our Guddawwa.

The milky mountain stood soaking in the moonlight drizzle.
Moonlight, falling on the eucalyptus leaves, dripped, drop by drop on us.
We were all drenched in that moonlight rain.

All the children gathered around Guddawwa. Aunt Sakkupinnamma brought soaked bottle-gourd seeds and sat with us. Each seed was being slowly mill-ground in her mouth. Guddawwa made laddus with fresh *channa* and jaggery and gave one to each of us.

Then Sakkupinnamma asked, "These children are so dear to you. You make things for them to eat. You tell them stories. You play with them. You make them laugh. You are so happy when they are happy. When they fall ill, you barely eat. Tell me, why are you so fond of them?"

"You silly woman!" replied Guddawwa. "Who doesn't like the moon! We have only one moon in the sky, but see how many moons sit around me," she said pointing to us. As she said this, I saw a gentle, cool moonlight rain in her eyes.

I asked her to tell us the story of the coconut bride. Peerugadu asked for the-fox-and-the-pig story. Lacchumakka asked for the hollow-bottle-gourd-and-the-ram story. But Guddawwa wouldn't tell us any of the stories we asked for!

"Shall I tell you a new story today? Will you listen?" she asked us.
We nodded our heads.

Guddawwa began telling the story. Vasanta sat in her lap and listened.

Once upon a time, Skymother had two sons. The older son was called Suranna, after the sun and the younger one was named Chandranna, after the moon. They had no father. Skymother raised them all by herself with a lot of love and affection. She taught them many skills. One day, both her sons came to her and said, “Mother, permit us to make a tour of the world.” “You both are like my eyes!” she said, weeping. “If you go away who will look after me?”

Sakkupinnamma’s eyes filled with tears as she listened. She blew her nose and wiped her tears with her saree pallu.

Suranna and Chandranna said, “Our education will be of use only if we travel around the world. We promise to return in a year’s time. So, please bless us and let us go.”

Skymother said, “Alright, since you are so keen on going, why should I stop you? Go, have a safe journey. When you get back, marry your uncle’s daughters, Pagatamma (Day) and Reyyamma (Night) and live happily.”

Suranna went East and Chandranna went West.

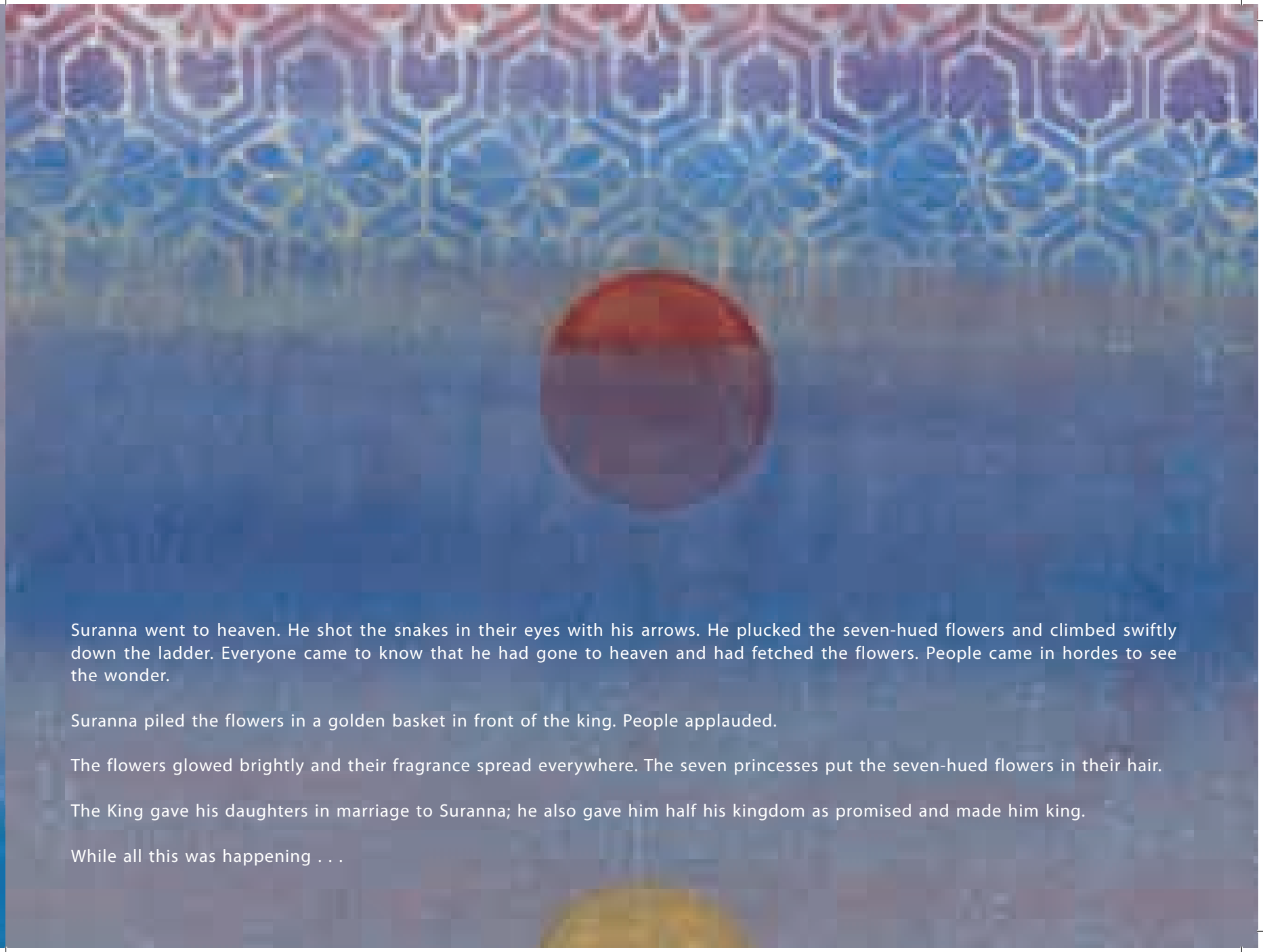
After wandering around the kingdoms of the East, Suranna came to a land called Indraprastha ruled by King Vanaprastha. This king had seven daughters. The daughters had a great desire for the seven-hued flowers of heaven. They vowed to marry none other than the hero who could fetch those flowers for them. The king made a proclamation saying that he would not only give his daughters in marriage but also half his kingdom to the brave man who could carry out this daring feat.

Many great kings and princes made the journey to heaven and tried to pluck the flowers. Some met their end when struck by the snakes guarding the flowers; others chose to come back empty-handed rather than lose their lives. Days went by.

King Vanaprastha made fresh announcements everyday. But none succeeded in getting the seven-hued flowers. The king was in despair, yet his daughters did not relent.

Suranna, who arrived in Indraprastha, heard the announcement. He set out for heaven. With his arrows he built a ladder that touched the sky.

Ravi slapped his thigh and declared, “Bujjakka, just wait and see, I too will make a ladder of arrows to heaven tomorrow.” “Stop your muttering. I am listening to the story,” scolded Bujjakka. But Ravi didn’t seem to care one bit; he was in his own world. With his empty hands, he was shooting arrows that went ‘zoom, zoom’ to the sky.



Suranna went to heaven. He shot the snakes in their eyes with his arrows. He plucked the seven-hued flowers and climbed swiftly down the ladder. Everyone came to know that he had gone to heaven and had fetched the flowers. People came in hordes to see the wonder.

Suranna piled the flowers in a golden basket in front of the king. People applauded.

The flowers glowed brightly and their fragrance spread everywhere. The seven princesses put the seven-hued flowers in their hair.

The King gave his daughters in marriage to Suranna; he also gave him half his kingdom as promised and made him king.

While all this was happening . . .

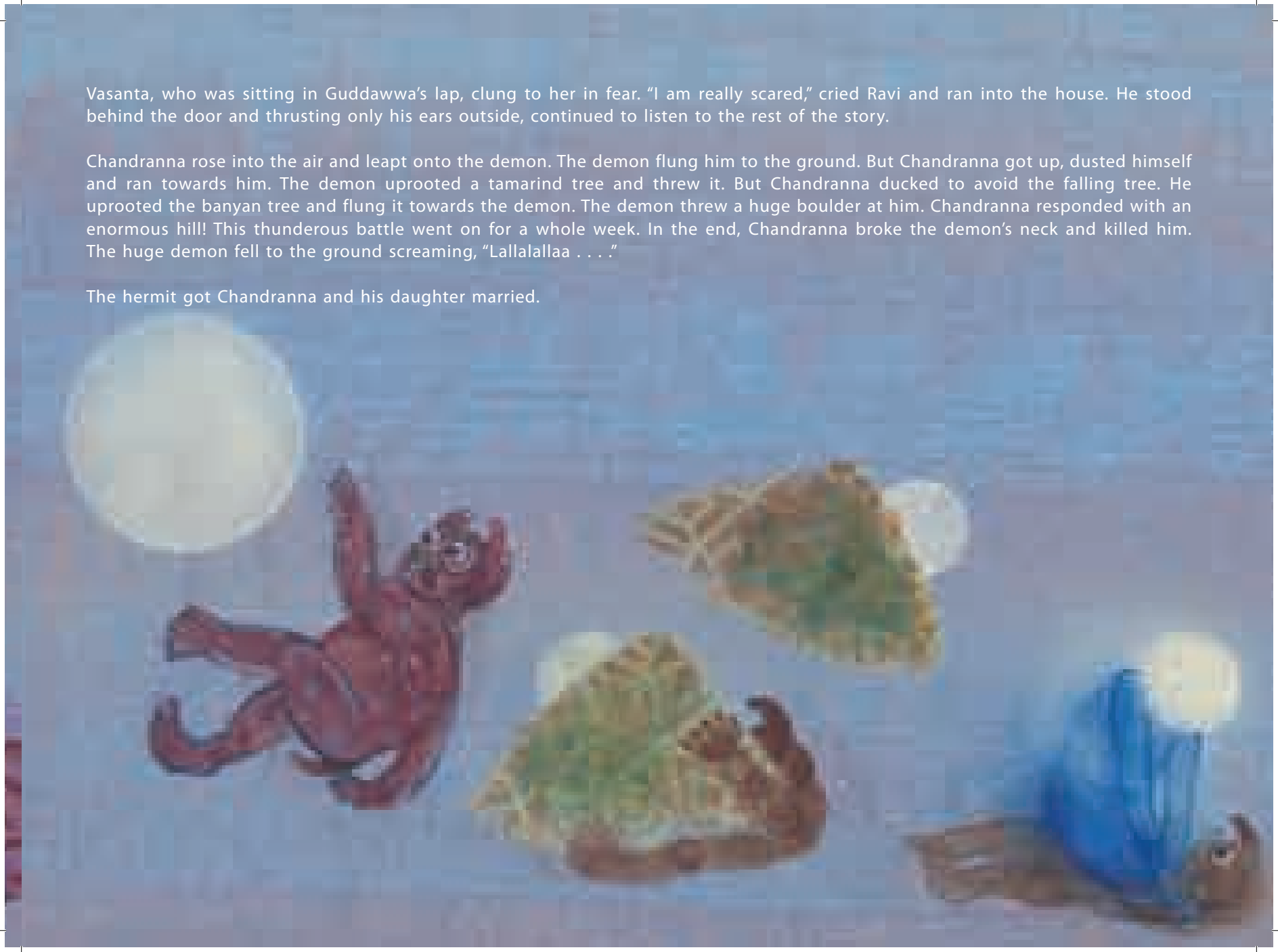
Chandranna, who went West riding a horse, reached a really thick forest. The forest was almost impenetrable. There lived a hermit practicing his penances. He had a beautiful daughter. A *brahmarakshasa* had been pestering the hermit to let him marry her. One day when the hermit wasn't around, the demon kidnapped his daughter and hid her in the trunk of a banyan tree that stood on the other side of the seven seas. The hermit was distraught. It was at this time that our Chandranna felt very thirsty and stopped at the hermitage. The hermit gave him water and quenched his thirst. Chandranna noticed that the hermit was in despair and asked, "Swami, why do you look so troubled?" The hermit recounted the whole story. He said, "You look like a prince. If you save my daughter from the great demon, I will give her in marriage to you."

Chandranna mounted his horse, crossed the seven seas and went near the banyan tree. The great demon lunged towards him . . .

Vasanta, who was sitting in Guddawwa's lap, clung to her in fear. "I am really scared," cried Ravi and ran into the house. He stood behind the door and thrusting only his ears outside, continued to listen to the rest of the story.

Chandranna rose into the air and leapt onto the demon. The demon flung him to the ground. But Chandranna got up, dusted himself and ran towards him. The demon uprooted a tamarind tree and threw it. But Chandranna ducked to avoid the falling tree. He uprooted the banyan tree and flung it towards the demon. The demon threw a huge boulder at him. Chandranna responded with an enormous hill! This thunderous battle went on for a whole week. In the end, Chandranna broke the demon's neck and killed him. The huge demon fell to the ground screaming, "Lallalallaa . . . ."

The hermit got Chandranna and his daughter married.



Ravi emerged from behind the door and came back to sit with us.

Both the sons returned to their mother along with their wives. They also married their uncle's daughters—Suranna married Pagatamma and Chandranna married Reyyamma.

Ever since Chandranna lives with Reyyamma for fifteen days and then spends another fifteen days with the hermit's daughter . . . that is why we have moonlight for fifteen days and darkness for fifteen days.

Some time went by.

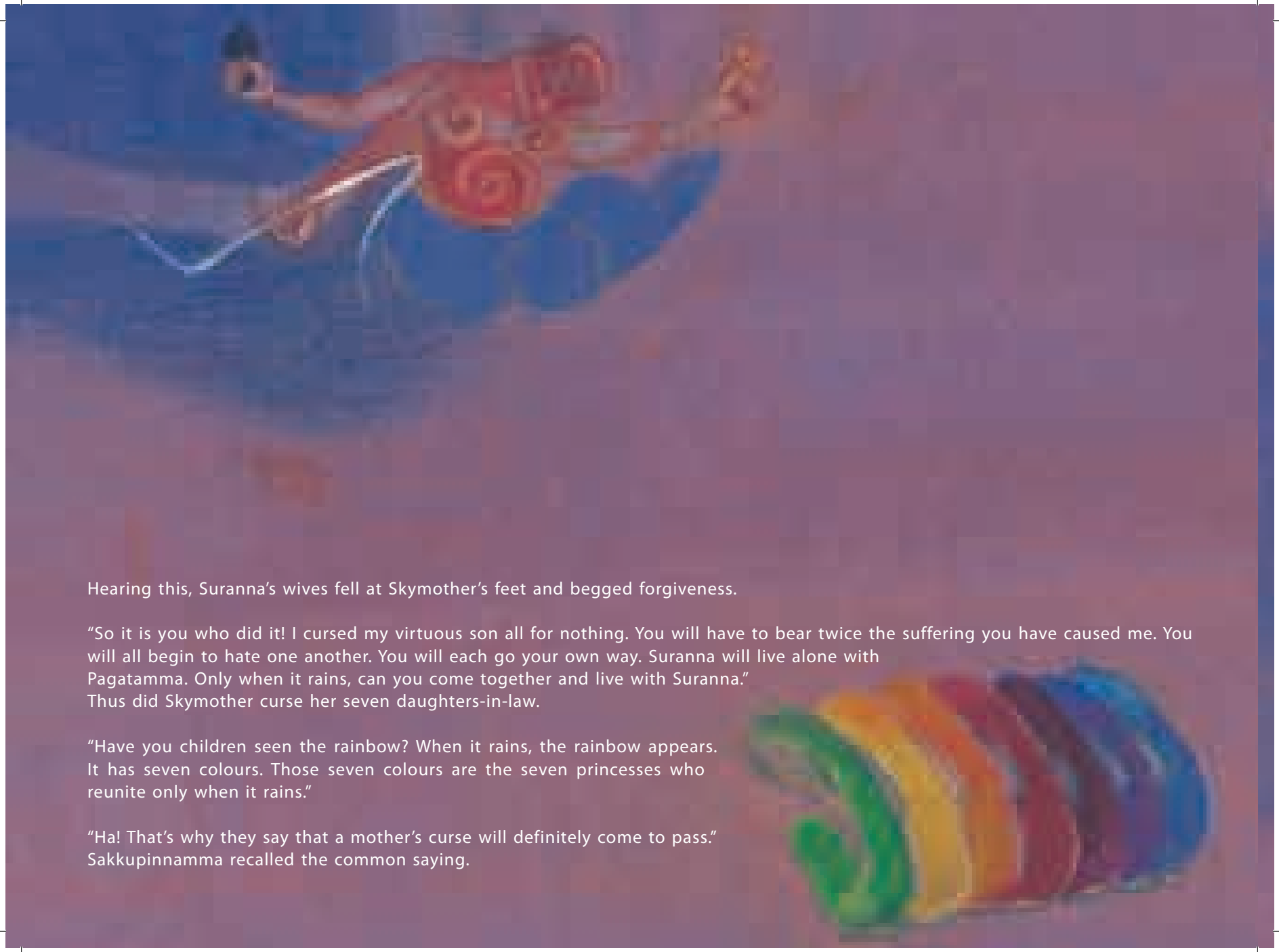
Skymother fell very ill. The Medicine Man said that she would survive only if she drank buttermilk that came from churning the sea. Both the brothers made a staff out of the silver hills and churned the seas. They brought back two pots full of buttermilk.

Chandranna went straight to his mother.

Suranna went to his seven wives, who could not stand Pagatamma. They also hated their mother-in-law, who regarded Pagatamma as the chief queen. So, without Suranna's knowledge, they mixed chilli powder into the buttermilk.

When Skymother drank Chandranna's pot of buttermilk, her stomach cooled down. She blessed him, "Chandranna, your cool buttermilk has healed me, so you and your wife, Reyamma will always remain cool. With your cool hands you will give moonlight to the world. You will be liked by everyone."

She drank Suranna's pot of buttermilk. Her stomach felt like it was on fire. She cursed him, "How dare you burn my stomach! You and your wives will always burn. Everyone will look at you and say, 'Oh this terrible heat!' and they will curse you."



Hearing this, Suranna's wives fell at Skymother's feet and begged forgiveness.

"So it is you who did it! I cursed my virtuous son all for nothing. You will have to bear twice the suffering you have caused me. You will all begin to hate one another. You will each go your own way. Suranna will live alone with Pagatamma. Only when it rains, can you come together and live with Suranna."
Thus did Skymother curse her seven daughters-in-law.

"Have you children seen the rainbow? When it rains, the rainbow appears. It has seven colours. Those seven colours are the seven princesses who reunite only when it rains."

"Ha! That's why they say that a mother's curse will definitely come to pass."
Sakkupinnamma recalled the common saying.

Skymother was in misery as she had cursed her son so wrongfully. “I cursed my innocent son; what kind of a mother am I! I am a heartless woman. I don’t want to live anymore. Let me climb that big rock and jump to my death.” Skymother swiftly climbed the rock and prepared to jump down.

At that time, Parvati and Lord Parameswara, passing by in a chariot, saw her. “My lord! Stop the chariot. There is a woman there who seems ready to jump off the rock,” said Parvati.

Shiva chided her, “This is the problem with women. Let her jump and die, how does it matter to us. Shut up and let’s go.”

Parvati shouted at her husband. “Are you a God or a demon? All you men are the same! When you need us, you are willing to shower jewels on us, and when you no longer need us, you cast us away. Vile as snakes!”

“I only need to open my mouth and you are ready to get into a fight. One can afford to wear a snake around one’s neck but never tie a *mangalsutra* around a woman’s neck,” grumbled Shiva as he brought the chariot to the ground.

Parvati caught hold of Skymother’s pallu and stopped her from jumping off the mountain. Seeing Parvati and Parameswara, Skymother burst into tears. She told them the whole story. They said, “It is not your fault, nor is it your son’s fault. All this is our *leela*. Your elder son will give sunlight to all the living beings on earth and the younger one will give moonlight. We are the unseen gods, but they are the gods whom all can see.” With these words, Parvati and Parameswara left in their chariot. Skymother went home.

“That is the end of the story. Let’s go home now,” said Guddawwa.

One by one, everyone got up to go.

The crane, sitting on the branch of the tamarind tree, woke up and shook its wings. Milky moonlight dripped everywhere.

“Atha, it is so late in the night, I must go home,” said Sakkupinnamma picking up her vessel full of bottle-gourd seeds.

Reddy followed his mother.

All the children got up, shook the dirt out of their clothes and started for their homes. Vasanta had gone to sleep in Guddawwa’s lap. Peerubabu picked her up, put her on his shoulders and said to me, “Come, let’s go home.”

I said, “I won’t come. I’ll sleep here with Guddawwa.”

Peerubabu left with Vasanta.

Guddawwa put the peeled nuts into a basket. She swept the floor and spread out a quilt and brought out the pillow stuffed with rice husk. I lay down on the quilt. Guddawwa put out the lamp and lay beside me. She covered me with the tattered sheet and herself with her own saree.

Thick moonlight was falling on my eyes.

The moon was like a ball of butter floating in buttermilk. I looked at it and said, “Just you wait! I am somehow going to steal you tomorrow.”

I woke up with a start at dawn when I heard the cock crowing.

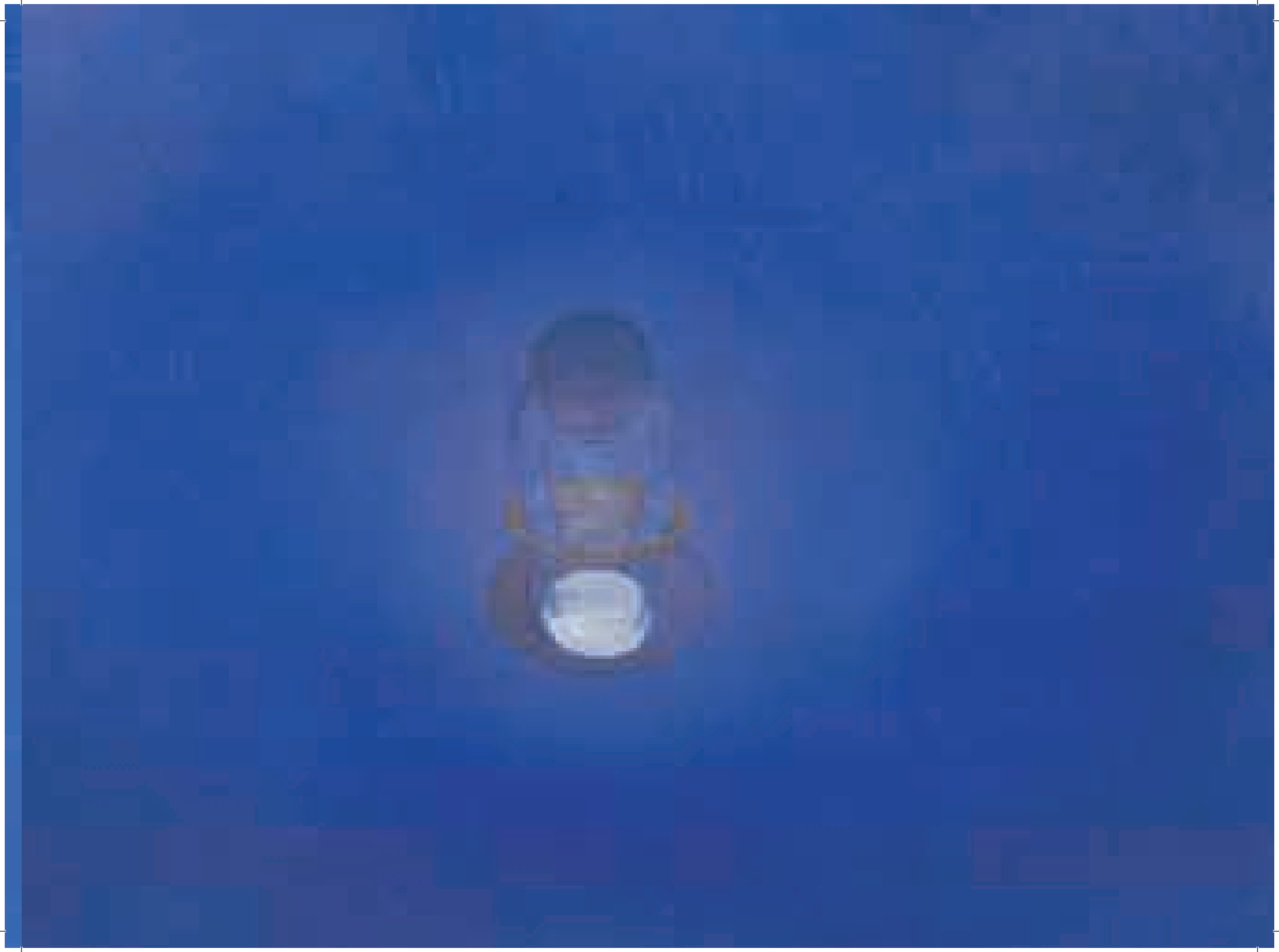
Guddawwa had gone with her water-pot to draw water from the well. She must have used the spinning wheel; the spokes were still going round and round as if they were giggling.

There was no moon in the sky. It looked like she had already hidden it in the pot that was hanging in the rope basket. Stealthy as a cat, I went near the basket. It was hung too high for me. I climbed onto the sack with the *channa* grains. I peeped out of the door and looked into the yard to see if Guddawwa was coming. I picked up the pot slowly, brought it down; I knelt down and lifted the cover on the pot.

It was as if I was hit by lightening . . . I couldn't see a thing for a while. The pot was filled with the shimmer of a million lights. The moon was dazzlingly bright.

I wanted to put my hands into the pot and pick up the moon, but it kept slipping out of my hands like a baby fish. I used both my hands like a sieve and picked it up at last. The ball of moonlight in my hands felt like ice. I kissed it. It was cold to my lips.

My whole body shuddered with pleasure.



I heard Guddawwa approaching.

I got up quickly and hid the moon under my pillow. Like an innocent child, I pulled the sheet over my head and went to sleep.

Anveshi

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List of Titles

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“Old Guddawwa creates a magical world for her grandson even though her own life has been full of struggle and hardship.”

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