



Almost Eldest

Padmaja Sriram

Ranga lived with his parents—as any eldest son should, in his family—just that he wasn't. His elder brother, Partha enhanced their lives mostly with his absence, for which Ranga and his parents were eternally thankful. He dropped in at the house with his little army of wife and daughter to make frail Amma cook his favorite dishes, check Appa's bank balance, Amma's gold ornaments and other valuables, fight with Appa and curse his two siblings. When the army left, the family breathed a joint sigh of relief, except for Amma who wept her tears of regret in secret.

Every three months, between Partha's visits, there was joy. For Ranga, there was success and fun: earning acclaim for stock tips; gaining rich clients who became friends later on; going to local

clubs where Paranjothi and Vincent stayed together with him exchanging market gossip till dawn; driving to go on tours with mates, packing, talking, laughing and playing cards at Karupayya's house. It meant an almost daily meeting of friends at the Chennai club, a few minutes away from his office. Partha made several failed attempts to stop his club visits, mocking him on his varied friends' circle, for "What's the use? You'll never make it in life". Chennai club was one of the few places to which Partha was rarely invited.

When there was Partha, Ranga's deals would, somehow not come through; if he told his clients to sell a particular stock, its price would, in effect, go up or vice-versa. He would have to tolerate choice profanities on the phone. At the club too, his friends would find silly reasons to avoid him.

Hidden below a stack of old, worn-out clothes in a dark corner of the shelf laden with dust and cobwebs, there lies an old color photograph in a black-bordered frame. It was taken moments after the wedding. A Malayali woman in a gold-bordered white silk Saree and a Tamil Brahmin man in maroon-bordered silk *Veshti*; Sheela was short and slim with oblique eyes. On her firm shoulders rested a clear head, determined jaws, hands crossed in front appearing demure. She was smiling. Standing beside her, Partha looked like a younger version of the Sheriff of Nottingham straight out of Kevin Costner's Robin Hood movie but with short hair. His face filled with beard and mustache, jet black hair brushed back neat, Partha stood tall looking sharp with piercing eyes. Black-rimmed glasses settled perfectly on his nose bridge. His lips were pursed as if piled up with grudges. He wore the sacred thread on his naked upper body, white *Veshti*, and Chappals. Even the photo could not hide his flaming eyes and restlessness. He looked all tough, not callow.

In 1993, a few years after the Indian economy opened up and a year after Partha's marriage, Ranga's sister Vedavalli, brimming with a 24-year-old's energy, went to work like everyone else, including lots of women who took advantage of jobs blooming like lotuses in the booming economy. She looked forward to her dream job in a chemist lab every day and the occasional girl-seeing ceremonies Appa arranged in the house, filling the hall with scents of Jasmine flowers and aromas of sweet *Kesari* and hot *Bhajjis*. When this happened, Ranga teased her, and Amma took rock salt in one hand and red chilies in the other and rotated both hands to remove *Drishti*—black eyes—from her. Amma said she remembered Vedavalli being a school and college topper, scoring much better than Partha, who was considered intelligent until then. In those days, Amma begged her uncle who was an educationist to fix a confirmed spot for Partha at the prestigious Regional Engineering College in Trichy. He got it and had a good career head start. Till he completed, he did not make any attempt to bestow the same grace on Ranga. However, Ranga made it to a premier management institute—on his own—and ended up a prosperous stockbroker.

When Appa retired, he took up the groom-hunting task full-time visiting astrologers and matchmaking brokers. Every week, he opened the Tamil magazine, *Narasimhapriya*, looked through the "Brides Wanted" section, circled possible suitors, took their horoscopes to the astrologer, spoke to the parents of well-matched grooms, and arranged the girl-seeing ceremony. Except for a local software engineer, every suitable match's family rejected her—not for her qualifications or beauty, but her eldest brother's out-of-community marriage. For a little over six years, Appa pursued the exhausting search for a groom. Vedavalli and her fat groom went abroad to the US in just a few months after marriage.

Lonely, yet frigid and unfriendly, Vedavalli safeguarded her life with her husband and kids and avoided everyone, especially Partha and Sheela. Except for Amma whom she called nearly every day,

speaking non-stop for at least two hours, she whispered on the phone and heard Amma whispering about everything from petty details to serious information Ranga never knew nor cared for. When Ranga sat down to eat and Amma started serving, the phone would ring. Leaving all chores aside, Amma would run to pick it up. Vedavalli indulged in endless discussion: who got married and divorced, who paid for grandma's nurses, how to involve everyone in her son's sacred thread ceremony, and so on. 'I wonder what mother and daughter keep talking to each other for so long.' Appa would say looking at Ranga, for which Ranga would simply shrug his shoulders and continue eating and serving himself

When Ranga was two, he was playing with a wooden toy that Partha snatched.

"Oh come on now, Partha, give it back," said Amma.

"This is my toy, Amma."

"I'll buy you another one."

"I'll give it to him when you buy it."

That night, Partha took a fiendish delight over Ranga after hitting him with the toy. "Now, take it," he sneered at him. Ranga did not yell or cry, not even as much as a whimper passed through his lips. But Amma saw blood flowing on the side of his head, near his right ear. The air hostess next door bundled Ranga into her car and took him to the hospital. A scar near his right ear still exists, and the broken toy still sits in the attic.

Partha was the bile Ranga retched out after every visit. He was the slow poison in his stomach, his bones, his blood, and whenever Partha ridiculed him and Ranga didn't sense quickly enough to retort, it became a nightmare. There was no brotherly concern,

nothing at all, not even sparing Ranga of ordinary expectations in life.

Ranga knew how Partha sweet-talked him into leaving his first job in Bombay, before it was called Mumbai, to go back to live with Appa and Amma. At that time, Partha was also working there. "You'll not fit in here; at least go back and take care of parents." He said that after Ranga fell ill with malaria and Partha shoved him into uncle Kuppu's house in Pune to rest. Ranga knows that Partha is a runaway. "I'll take care of the whole family," Partha merely repeated.

As in every Tamil family, daughters are married off before sons. Years ago, when Ranga waited patiently for his sister's marriage, his girlfriend left him. He never blamed anyone, not Partha, not his parents, and definitely not Vedavalli. She heard how Amma clasped Ranga's hands and wept minutes after Vedavalli's wedding: Ranga sacrificed his marriage for hers.

Ranga never called him Anna, the Tamil word for elder brother. Always Partha from the time Ranga was pinched and beaten as a kid when no one was looking, Ranga knew that Partha hid in the hills near Mumbai, only to come swooping down during the family's vulnerable times. Partha had a special instinct for that. But before settling in the hills, he and his wife Sheela—girlfriend at the time—sold grandma's investments to buy their house. Every few months, they imposed themselves on parents staying for a week or two, cleaning the house thoroughly with an intent to check on all household items including valuables, and updating themselves on the latest gossip and information. After six years, when Vedavalli finally got married, they attended all the events, particularly noting and recording the jewels she was bestowed from her parents and grandma. After that, they refused to buy an apartment near Appa's

house built on the land inherited from grandpa and divided among Appa and his siblings. Ranga bought it.

There were conflicts in the joint family of eleven sons and daughters of which Appa was the eldest. After his father's untimely demise, Appa sorted out his brothers and took care of his mother until her end—sisters were married off when Appa's father was alive. Any dissent was known to everyone—when Appa's niece found out her husband was going after another woman; which niece's husband did not feed his old mother-in-law; why his brother married his lover and not his own cousin; when would Appa's last nephew beget a child; and who hated Appa the most. There were disagreements, true, and they were openly fought. On family occasions, the relatives squabbled in groups or whispered in corners. All except Partha.

There's a general perception that was there to stay: discrete, suave and an intense propensity for righteous talk, a non-stop rattling on the unfairness in Appa's behavior, unfairness in parent's support for Vedavalli, unfairness in Appa's dealing with his brothers, unfairness in the joint family, and unfairness in the whole society and so on.

"Oh, how perceptive!" Kuppu—Appa's last brother—would say, charmed by Partha. Outside of Appa, Amma, Ranga, and Vedavalli, none knew of Partha's true colors. He maintained it that way.

It was during the lockdown that Appa passed away. He fell, broke his hip, lay immobilized, was operated on, and came back home in an ambulance to recover. All that in a month. Partha had Corona tests taken for Appa, both for relevant and frivolous reasons. Appa always tested negative.

Doctors were reluctant to give medical certificates needed for the cremation. To complicate matters, Partha had ordered another frivolous Corona test for Appa, again. If positive, Appa's body

would lie in a morgue without a basic funeral. That, for a man who had spent more than fifty years performing the yearly *Shraddhams* – ancestral worship – for his own parents religiously and devotedly; it cut Ranga's heart, deep. He set out on Sunday morning in an autorickshaw and went to the family doctor's house. A policeman stopped his vehicle as it was a lockdown day. Ranga simply called up his friend and pretended it was the Police Commissioner. The policeman let him go. There were a few other hurdles and tense moments, but Ranga did it—the family doctor graciously signed it. Cremation rites went on without a hitch. The results came out negative, as usual.

By noon, it was all over. A few relatives stayed on.

"Where is Partha?" asked Narayanan, Appa's nephew.

"Partha couldn't come because of the lockdown," said Aunt Vanjulam.

"He will be allowed to travel if he shows the medical certificate," Narayanan said.

"He'll probably come in the next few days. He is such a kind person." Aunt Vanjulam said.

"Once, I heard him counseling his friend on how he should care for his parents: bring them home, give them a lively atmosphere, handle them gently, and take care of their health," Kuppu said.

"And after that, he would push Appa to an old age home," Ranga said. "But no, I was totally against it, arranged an in-house attendant."

"Hush, Ranga," Kuppu stopped him, his eyes stern. "He has messaged me. It reads: I'm coming tomorrow evening, by eight."

"Even the kids adore him. He speaks to everyone except his sister." Aunt Vanjulam added.

"Why would you say that? He is a great uniting force. Last week, when you were not well, he called me up to enquire," said Kuppu.

"That's all he does: enquire. Ten years ago, I remember Ranga rushing to several doctors and hospitals to treat Appa's cancer. In the end and after the cure, Partha took Appa once for the regular check-up, just once and kept boasting about it to all the uncles and aunts. He didn't even spare your mother's relatives." Nephew Narayanan said, looking at Ranga.

The fact was, Partha never did anything but in a silly way, interfered everywhere but taking credit if things turned out well. Smart.

"Partha is not a bad man," Aunt Vanjulam said. "He's just probably immature."

"Remember I told you what happened the last time he came, a month before lockdown, six months before Appa passed away?" Ranga told her.

Partha sent an SMS to Ranga one Sunday afternoon that he was coming over to Appa's house that evening, and he landed immediately in a few minutes' time. It was a few months after Amma passed away. Appa was living with full-time security; a cook would come twice a day – in the morning and evening. When Ranga went to meet him, Partha was aloof.

The next morning, instead of going to work, Ranga dropped into the house amidst an altercation between Partha and Appa. No prizes for guessing the oft-repeated topic for the argument: Appa's bank passbooks. As he sat down in the sofa room near Appa's throne-like chair, Partha drew a Moda—the bamboo stool—from the hall and sat facing Appa. The setting was apt for the start of an argument that would end in a fight again; this time, the only difference being the presence of Ranga.

"Let me update your bank passbooks. Where are they?" Partha said.

"Partha, it's lying somewhere below some dusty files in the cupboard. Forget it." Appa said.

"I am free only today," he said.

"I cannot search for it now. I need to bathe," said Appa.

"I'll wait," said Partha.

"Not necessary. You may have other tasks to do. Go ahead." Appa said.

"Oh, come one now," Partha said.

"The bank will be crowded. You can do it later," said Appa.

"Is this the most important thing to do? What about doing your bit for Appa's care?" butted in Ranga. "Look, I've been living here all my life and taking care of my parents. Now, I need a break."

"Fine, what do you want me to do?" asked Partha in a weak whisper.

"Do you want to take Appa to live with you? Or shift here and care for him?"

There was strange silence. It was always like that when pinning down Partha. "I cannot shift, for sure. Let Appa come to my place. My wife will take care of him." He said, at last.

"But all my siblings are here. I've lived here my whole life," said Appa.

"Shifting is out of the question. The house is dilapidated, and my wife cannot live here." Partha said.

"What if I die in your place? Nobody will come to my funeral." Appa said.

"I'll pack your body and send it back to Chennai," Partha replied.

The bile rising again, Ranga felt disgusted at the down-to-earth exchange and more so at the indifference in Partha's tone. "Take another house here for rent and bring your wife and daughter. Appa will also live there." Ranga said.

Partha, as usual, stayed for a week. The next day, he was all set to clean the water sump. He also brought in a local electrician to repair the fan and AC. The day after that, he went for a medical check-up and came home looking distraught. He was heard talking to his daughter that the report would come only the next day. If its

anything serious, the doctors would have to take more tests. Appa was slightly perturbed. The day he left, Partha called up Ranga to say goodbye and sounded oddly cheerful. There was something wily in his tone.

Later, Ranga found Appa in a frenzy going about the kitchen searching for some powder. After that, for a week, Appa did not speak to Ranga. Much later, Appa revealed to Ranga that Partha had got him panicky: telling Appa the cook was using the rat poison powder in his food to slow-poison him, telling him not to eat the biscuits Ranga bought as those had preservatives and instead eat the ones he bought, then teaching him to operate the mobile to speak to him, and finally telling him to avoid Ranga at all costs.

"Well, Partha is good to all of us, it's just his own family he can't stand." Aunt Vanjulam said.

"No, Aunt," Ranga said. "It's just Appa and me he can't stand."

"He misses you too much. Maybe his wife is goading him. I'll tell him not to mock you." She said.

"She can goad him to her heart's content. But she will realize when it backfires. How will an irresponsible man be a good husband or even a good father?" Narayanan said.

Appa had finally realized about Partha that the cook and poison incident was a lie fabricated to specifically unsettle him, remove his only pillar of strength – Ranga, and in Ranga's place establish himself. And, for what? To take care of him? No. To rummage his belongings, his secret wooden *Diwan* sofa drawers, and his bureau that contained house documents. Yes and no. To establish his birthright? Maybe.

Spread over thirteen days, the funeral rites—performed chiefly by the eldest son—are suffused with importance: rites before cremation and immediately after with the ashes, the nine-day mourning rites, the main tenth day when Appa's siblings and children worship and pray to a large mound of mashed rice symbolizing Appa's soul with the priests chanting potent mantras—the day the new astral body is formed—the day the eldest son becomes the next family head with Appa's blessings, the twelfth day where the deceased joins its ancestors, and finally the celebratory thirteenth day. And then, there are the yearly *Shraddhams*. Everything done by Appa himself for his parents; everything repeated.

Partha squatted in Appa's house for the 14-day quarantine stay as required by the lockdown rules. When he arrived, he quarreled on where the rituals should be held. "Why at Appa's house? Why not Krishna Theertham, the center for ancestral rites?"

"In these times?" Ranga struck back. "Why could you not have taken a hotel room for your quarantine?" In a pleasant surprise twist, the routine nine-day rites had gone on smoothly.

It was the tenth day. The priests arrived one after another along with their assistants. There was a thatched hut erected on the veranda near the gate. Inside was a large mound of boiled rice paste with tufts of *Darba* or *Halfa* grass below. Cousins, uncles, and aunts strewn all over the hall, drawing room, and kitchen recollected the glorious days of Appa and their youth in the process.

Dressed in the ritualistic *Panchakacham*, traditional *Veshti* tying style, Ranga entered Appa's house looking at the pasted A4 size sheet that read "My Room" on the bedroom door. As soon as he had come, Partha had pasted the printed sheet as if he were ready to possess what he decided as his part of the house. Shaking the bedroom door to check if it was locked from the inside, Ranga felt reassured and strode towards the hall where Kuppu was sitting.

Suddenly, "Ranga," called Partha, opening the quarantine door. "Can I ask you a favor? Please."

"You can join, Partha," Kuppu said. "Ranga, you need to include Partha on this day, especially. Partha can come out at the right sacred timing, do his prostrations first before anyone else, and get back into the quarantine room. Nobody will notice."

Ranga was mum.

"It was wrong of you to do Appa's cremation in the first place, wasn't it?" Kuppu continued, "You could have waited."

"And let Appa's body rot? Wasn't that what he wanted?" Ranga looked at Partha.

"But Appa turned out negative," Kuppu said.

"What if it were otherwise?" Ranga asked. "Wasn't Appa your brother? Would you like him to rot in a morgue?"

The priest had parked a plastic chair next to the compound across the thatched hut. He supervised the prostration ceremony at the mound. Relatives watched his instructions warily.

Ranga knew that Partha got excessively excited seeing the relatives. He did not want to appear obstructing the rites in front of them, did not want to destroy the carefully cultivated image—cultivated for years, decades maybe. On the contrary, he wanted to look as if he, the eldest son, was heading the ceremony and heaped praise in return.

"Thanks," said Partha with relief although Ranga didn't even reply. He exhaled deeply. Smart. Always turned every situation to his convenience. Ranga also suspected that Partha wished, albeit unfairly, to have Appa's final blessings after creating life-long maiming and lasting sufferings.

"For the next three days," Kuppu continued, "Partha can dash in and out before anyone ever sets their eyes on him. That way, Appa can bless him as he was once blessed himself." Kuppu's voice was cautious and low. "So..."

"The head-priest will not allow it." Ranga butted in.

"I'll convince him." Kuppu watched him steadily. It's the same expression Ranga imagined he wore when he backed Partha on his marriage against Appa's wishes so he could create a serious rift between father and son. "I'm plagued by uncles," sighed Ranga.

The assistants were gathering near the head-priest. In the garden, aunts were waiting for the rituals to start.

It would not work. Kuppu would blindly support, Partha would create tiresome obstacles, Aunt Vanjulam would rant, confused, and Ranga would somehow have to keep the family tradition alive – the only change being Appa, Partha's target, was now getting replaced by Ranga. He could see it coming—Nip it in the bud—Ranga imagined his father say.

Kuppu's tone was calm. "Ranga, people change. Have you ever thought about that? I changed. Your father changed. Maybe Partha has too."

Kuppu did not deserve to say that. For his son, he followed the conservative convention of parents choosing their son's wife. Stubbornly, uncle and aunt searched for several years and found a rich girl to marry their son. So much for backing Partha's marriage. How has Kuppu changed?

Gently, Kuppu said. "You don't always have to take up all the responsibility," and Ranga felt something serious stripped off him.

"Come on, Ranga," Partha said. "We're family. I'm still the eldest."

"This was how Appa must have felt: attacked, cornered, and eaten up." Ranga thought. With a jerk, Ranga moved into Partha's room, Kuppu tailing, closing the door behind him. He pulled the plastic chair towards him and sat. Somewhere deep down, he still felt scared of Partha. Then, an instant spark struck his mind: his 89-year-old father had staved off that son for at least three decades standing rock solid and fighting for what he believed in even at that withering age and a fragile body. Drawing himself up full, Ranga said, "You are not the eldest. You did not behave like one. You are irresponsible. You did not even do your basic duty." He clutched at

the sides of the chair. Rage rose inside him. He wanted to hurt and destroy, like Partha, like Kuppu. He stood, towered above Partha, and raised the chair with both hands. He didn't say a word, but there were noises growling at his throat.

Outside, the priest was calling his name loudly. For once, Partha wasn't mocking, wasn't frowning, wasn't cornering to force his way through life. Finally, he saw the vulnerable Partha.

"Oh, no!" said Partha. "Please."

Ranga saw now how Partha must have felt just after a triumphant fight. The chair remained in his hands for a few seconds.

"You do not qualify to be the eldest," Ranga said, throwing down the chair.

"After you left Appa's house to live in your apartment, you used to sneak into parent's house only for a few minutes. Weren't you the runaway?" Partha said.

"They lived in my place during the floods. I'm not the runaway here, Partha."

"Oh, you're such a devoted son. But whatever you do, you can never be the first one."

"I don't want to be. I am happy as I am."

"Then, let me out. Let me be the family heir."

"That, I'll not allow. You have to earn it!"

There was silence. Then Partha said, "You're living the life I've wanted."

Ranga paused. Partha said, "You're not getting away with it. I won't let you." There was silence again, and then Partha laughed. "You'll never make it in life. I'll ensure that. Just wait and see."

In a second, Ranga grabbed the door handle and pulled it. As he fastened the bolts of the bedroom door from outside, Ranga was aware that he had to let Kuppu come out because even now, feeling

as he did, he couldn't be unfair, couldn't punish his uncle for mere support.

"Open!" Partha cried in anguish.

Within seconds, Ranga locked the door and secured the key to the knot on his Veshti at the hip. The priest accosted him to the mound. Everyone was waiting. After long chanting, Ranga prostrated completely—body, mind, and soul—paid his respects to Appa's soul as the eldest, and got his blessings. As if they'd waited for this very moment, cousins, uncles, and aunts followed. They folded their hands, fell on their knees and prostrated, over and over, returned to the backyard, and took holy baths. Loud chatter of the relatives was heard along with tucking in of delicious breakfast of *Pongal*, *chutney*, coffee, and tea with relish. The morning sun dazzled, grew brighter, quietly turning to hotter, glaring strong rays. The holy hour passed by, and Ranga finally felt calm, confident, and content—his life-long duties over—the long-standing terror vanishing into oblivion.

Padmaja Sriram

Padmaja Sriram's short stories have been published in Funny Pearls UK, Annapurna Magazine and The UNiverse Journal, both print and online. Before she started writing fiction, Padmaja dabbled in the performing arts, bagging the prestigious Copeland fellowship with Amherst College, US. After that, just to shake things up, she studied management and took up a handful of executive postings with investment firms. Padmaja lives with her husband in Bangalore and now writes full-time.

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here](#).

Authors & Books

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.