

Rishi Reddi
from *Bangles*

Arundhati's son's home in Lexington, Massachusetts, sat on a tree-lined street near the country club, overlooking a large pond surrounded by willow trees. Clipped box hedges framed the lawn, a three-car garage was tucked tastefully out of view, the windows were cleaned, inside and out, every spring and fall, and in summer, red and pink petunias marked the stone walk leading to the front door. Arundhati stepped into the house with her right foot first, the auspicious way to begin things. It was a habit she had learned in childhood, and she was sixty-nine years old.

Her son guided her through a dim hallway to a carpeted bedroom with matching drapes and bedspread. Everything was clean. Dustless. Venu smiled and extended his arm, showing the size and luxury of the space. "This is your new room," he said in Telugu, and she nodded.

He might have said this is your new city, new country, new life, because he was her only son, her only child, and she was now a widow. She held his hand and smiled at him, to let him know she was pleased. This is why parents needed sons, so they would be cared for in old age. She knew Venu would not disappoint her.

He put down a suitcase, filled with Indian sweets, coconut oil for her hair, homemade mango pickle, and white saris. Arundhati had lived in the city of Hyderabad for years with her husband, but could not give up her belief in the traditional life. In the old days, in the villages, white was the only color a widow would wear. So it would be with her.

Venu's two daughters stood in the doorway to the bedroom. The younger one, Rani, ten years old, pointed her finger at the vase on the dressing table. "Look, Nanamma, I made them for you in school" she said in Telugu. Arundhati was relieved that her granddaughter spoke the language so easily. She could understand only a few English words, and had been concerned about communicating with her grandchildren.

The widow touched the fabric petals of the flowers, then turned to pinch the girl's cheek. "Thank you, *beta*. So sweet. And little Rahul?" she asked. "Where is he?" She was happy to meet her granddaughters after four long years, but it was the grandson, the one who would carry on her husband's name, that she most longed for.

"Wait wait, they are on the way," Venu said. Kamlesh picked up Rahul from daycare but called to say there was a traffic jam. They'll come any moment."

"Nanamma, shall I make you some tea?" Tara, the older granddaughter, asked.

"Oooooo!" Rani jumped up and down on her tiptoes. "I wanted to ask her that!"

"We have Taj Mahal – your favorite," Tara said.

Arundhati nodded her head, and the girls left, racing each other to the kitchen. Arundhati smiled and settled herself, slowly, because her knees ached, into the armchair near the bed.

"They have been looking forward to your coming," Venu said. He stood with his hands on his hips, like a Hindi cinema hero, appearing taller than he did just one month ago in Hyderabad, where he set the torch to his father's funeral pyre.

"The girls are speaking Telugu very well," Arundhati said. He seemed pleased with her remark.

A door slammed in the front of the house. "They're here," Venu said, and called to his wife.

Kamlesh appeared in the doorway, her cheeks flushed from the cold and still wearing her

overcoat, carrying little Rahul asleep in her arms. “*Namaste, namaste, Athamma.*” She put her palms together even while holding the child. “Sorry we’re late, a huge traffic jam and Rahul fell asleep in the car – no no don’t get up, here he is. I didn’t want to wake him because he’s been sick recently.”

“Yes, don’t disturb him,” Arundhati agreed.

“Nanamma, here’s your tea,” Tara said, carrying the tray into the room.

“I made it, Nanamma, I made it,” Rani said.

But their grandmother did not hear them. She was peering into the boy’s face as he slept against his mother’s shoulder, his pink lips partly open, his thick lashes perfectly curled against soft cheeks. At four years old, Rahul did not know Arundhati, and would never know his grandfather. But Arundhati noticed – how wonderful! – he had his grandfather’s nose and mouth.

“Such a blessing to have a boy,” Arundhati said to Venu. “He resembles your father. Maybe he, too, will be a Chief Minister.”

Kamlesh smiled.

“A senator, or a governor,” Venu said. He glanced at Kamlesh.

Arundhati could see: a son had been born – of course Venu loved Kamlesh even more now. She looked away. “Thank you for my tea,” she said to Rani, whose face brightened as soon as Arundhati spoke to her again.

Dinner that evening was a Hyderabadi feast: lamb biryani and raita, spinach dal, chicken koorma, eggplant with peanut gravy, garlic naan, and lemon rice. Afterwards, Arundhati began to fall asleep on the sofa at eight o’clock; it was six-thirty in the morning in Hyderabad. She wished everyone good night, raised herself from the sofa’s deep cushions, and walked slowly to her new room, in her new home, in her new city, and released her hair from its bun. She removed her earrings and necklace and put them on the dresser. The gold bangles remained on her wrists.

She loved her jewelry. It had been placed on her neck and wrists and fingers on the day of her bride-making by her grandmothers, aunts and older cousins, women who had journeyed before her through life. She would be a married woman now; she must wear the evidence of her status. Her mother had slipped Arundhati’s thin hands through the bangles herself: one gold bangle, then five delicate ones of red glass, another gold, another five of glass, another gold, until they were a joyful tinkling mass that covered her forearm, ending in the intricate henna design on her hand. It happened during a small private moment, before Arundhati sat down with the brahmin performing the ceremony. Her mother had kissed Arundhati’s cheeks and forehead, and hugged her with a passion of a last farewell. The memory made her smile. That was fifty-three years ago; it was hard to believe that she was a widow.

On the tenth day following her husband’s death, in the home where she had lived with her husband, a brahmin performed the Vedic ceremony before the sacred flame. Then her sister-in-law and her husband’s aunt, widows both, led her outside. They sat on the step at the back door, under the pink bougainvillea flowers that cascaded from the roof. The bush had grown and prospered while she and her husband had lived in that house, while they had raised Venu there. Inside, she could hear the hushed family conversation, the faint chanting of Sanskrit *slokas* from the tape recorder. It was a perfect November day; a soft breeze shifted the branches of the Ashoka trees.

The two widows wiped the vermilion bindi from her forehead and replaced it with ash. They slipped the silver toe rings from her feet. They took off the bangles she was wearing, both glass and gold. Arundhati watched as they shattered the glass bangles with the rocks that lay near by. She broke the last one herself, just as the tears clouded her vision. She was a widow now.

Then she slipped the gold bangles back on and walked inside the house to sit with the relatives, shorn of the symbols of marriage. Her husband was dead. Her son's kindness, the value of the jewelry she owned, the pittance that the government paid for her husband's pension, were the only protection she had against future misfortune.

Arundhati lay down on her new bed, wearing the thin cotton sari she wore for sleep, and saw her husband. He was dressed in a Nehru-style jacket and a white topee hat. A garland hung around his neck, reminding her of a ceremony in the distant past, when the Prime Minister came to visit the Assembly building. After fifty-three years of marriage, she did not know if she missed him, or if it was only reproach she felt – anger at his dying.

She opened her eyes. The curtains moved against the dark window. Her right eyelid began to flutter and she pressed against it gently with her palm to make it stop, because it was not an auspicious sign.