

# The Moon in the Earthen Pot by Gopini Karunakar

Once again Guddavva has taken out the moon from the earthen pot that hangs from our thatch roof, and thrown it back, up in the sky. Now the moonlight streams down, flooding the world.

The moon has to be stolen tonight, one way or the other. My father's mother, my Guddavva, will wake up early tomorrow and put the moon in the earthen pot again. But I'll remove the moon from there and hide it somewhere. Let me see what she does then! She has been fooling me every day about giving me the moon!

It all started one summer evening when it rained heavily. That night, stars appeared on our sunkeswari tree. I held the branches of the tree and shook them. The stars showered down. Collecting them in the folds of my shirt, I ran to show them to Guddavva.

'Avva, Avva, see what I have brought you!'

Peeraiah peeked into my dress. "So many stars!" he exclaimed, pressing his hands into his cheeks.

'Let me look, let me!' said Vasantha, jumping up and down, pulling at my hands. The stars slipped from the fold of my shirt and fell on Vasantha's head and clothes. With stars on her dress and stars in her hair, Vasantha shone like an aspara from heaven.

'Avva, see how many stars are there on my dress!' sang Vasantha, her laughter scattering like flowers.

'These are not stars, child. These are fireflies,' said Guddavva.

'Fireflies! What are fireflies?' I asked.

'Come, I'll tell you a story,' said Guddavva.

We sat down in front of her. I tossed some of the fireflies into the air. They floated along and settled on Guddavva's saree drying outside, winking their tiny lights. And my guddavva began:

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'All night, the moon chafes against the sky, scattering moondust. This dust is nothing but the fireflies. Once upon a time, the golden sparrows flew all the way to the kingdom of the gods to pray for light; Devuda, Devuda! Men light lamps at night, cobras have gems on their foreheads to light their way, and as for the owls, their eyes are their lamps. Our nests are filled with darkness. How are we to light our nests? We have our babies to think of, what is to become of us? They wailed.

'Moved to pity, god said, When the moon rubs against the sky and scatters dust, bring the dust to light up your nest. That's why, from then on, the golden sparrows build their nests with soft mud to catch fireflies. And as for the fireflies, they have always been happy to light up the nests of the golden sparrows.'

Even as I listened to the story, a thought struck me— if a little moondust could shower so much light, just imagine how much light the moon would bring. How very nice it would be to pluck the moon out and put it in the nest of the golden sparrows!

So the next night when I was lying in Guddavva's lap, I pointed to the moon in the sky, and said, 'Avva, I want the moon. Will you get it for me?'

'The moon? Let's see, I'll get it for you tomorrow.'

'No, I want it *now*,' I said, pulling a face and I pulled at the pallu of her saree and beat her on her breasts. I liked doing this just as once I had liked to pull away her saree pallu saying, 'I want milk, give me milk!'

'What a brat you are, just like your grandfather,' Avva said, slapping me affectionately. 'Won't the world plunge into darkness if I gave the moon now? So wait and I'll give it to you in the morning.'

The next morning I ran to ask her for the moon.

'I've kept the moon safely in the pot. If I take it out now, the moon will just melt in your hands, so wait till the night,' she said.

So I went again in the night.

Guddavva untied the rope and slowly brought the pot down from the roof. She dipped her hands in and brought out the moon in her cupped palms. But as she was giving it to me, her hands suddenly opened skywards and, 'Oho, the moon has flown away!' She exclaimed, pointing to the sky.

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I was very very angry and my insert hurt. Grabbing Guddavva's hair, I started beating her, screaming. 'You blind avva, why, why did you throw the moon back into the sky!'

Guddavva laughed through toothless gums. 'I'll give you the moon tomorrow night.'

The next night she did the same thing again. And every night since then she has been cheating me somehow. A few days ago, she hid the moon from me and I couldn't find it for days and days. Only today she did put the moon back in the sky again.

That's why I *must* somehow steal the moon tonight. I have even brought the nest of the golden sparrows and tied it to a branch of our sunkeswari tree. I shall put the moon in the nest and then Peerairah and Vasantha and I can go back to play, I thought giggling to myself as I walked towards the eucalyptus tree.

We all like Guddava so much. And Guddavva, she loves us!

She tells us stories. She gives us all lots and lots of special things to eat. She plays so many different games with us. And as for Vasantha and her friends, Avva plays other games- they are always drawing muggulu with rice flour on the ground, making flower garlands or plaiting one another's hair.

You got to keep an eye on Guddavva when she is telling a story for, in the middle of it, she may suddenly prod the clouds with her stick and bring rain. Or she'll make the sun blaze red hot, or the great big seas to rise in fury. Sometimes she can even magic the trees to burst into flowers! She says, A magician spans the seven seas with a single step!

I believed everything she said, but not my younger brother and sister. They were so suspicious!

The rakshasas in Guddavva's tales always stalked in meanly, menacingly, and then, one sight of the stick in her hand and they would quickly turn and flee! Do you know that gods take her to their kingdom, offer her a seat equal to their own, and listen to her stories? Even the birds and animals sit as if made of stone when she tells stories, and sometimes they even nod their heads. Oh you could see Guddavva when she holds her stick. She's a total sorceress! She moves the magic wand of hers and suddenly it is now a bow, now a dagger or mace or flute, anything she wants! I wonder where she learnt all this from.

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That's why it's sad that my guddavva of the wonderful tales has had a sad life.

My grandfather (whom I call Gorrela Thaatha) had a brother, Paramati Chengayya, who had two wives. My guddavva was his elder wife. Guddavva is the daughter of my grandfather's elder sister. That made Guddavva my mother's maternal aunt. Guddavva's parents' home was in Aarepalli-rangampeta, a town near Tirupathi. After marrying her, Chengayya Thaatha moved in with his wife's family and took up farming. It seems when my guddavva was very young, something happened to her left eye. They called a local doctor but her medicine only made it worse. And Guddavva became blind in her left eye. After this every one clean forgot the name 'Ijilacchmi,' and took to calling her 'Guddidaava.'

It seems Thaatha was terribly nasty tp Guddavva. He had a bad temper.

Right in the midst of this terrible life, Guddavva had a son. And immediately after this, Thaata married again and promptly forgot all about Guddavva and their son. Guddavva reached Tirupathi with her child and there, on the Tirupathi hill, she tried to do all kind of jobs- she carried firewood, she carried hay, she even carried bricks on the construction sites with her baby tied to her back. But after her son grew up, he went straight back to his father, married and settled in Rangampeta. Guddavva continued to live on the hill, working sometimes as a servant in the merchants' colonies, sometimes selling hot water to pilgrims who came to Tirupathi.

It was then my father brought her to our home. He had a hut built for Guddavva under eucalyptus tree. My mother too takes a great care of her but Guddavva doesn't rest for a moment. If she's not frying peanuts and making groundnut sweets with jiggery, she is selling

them outside our school. After school hours, she sits beside the bus stand near the Muslim bazaar. After the day has retired into the nest of darkness, Guddavva returns home, the days earnings tucked in a little pouch at her waist. She still earns for herself, says Amma.

This is my guddavva's story.

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And so .... The moonbeam was flooding our village. The moonlight dew fell on the leaves of the eucalyptus tree and then dropped gently on our heads. We, Peeraiah, Bujji and I, sat there, getting wet in the dewdrops, in the shower of moonlight.

Sakku Chinnamma came with her anapa ginjalu which had been soaked in water, and sat with us, skinning the pulses, as her mouth worked busily on betel. Next came Guddavva, bringing with her some groundnut sweets. She gave each of us one. Vasantha who came in behind Guddavva, was already eating her groundnut ball.

Guddavva set down her basket of groundnuts. She heaped them on the floor and began to shell the groundnuts one by one. She took out betel nuts and a leaf from the little pouch tucked in at her waist. 'Have some chunna?' she asked Sakku Chinnamma, who crooked her finger and scooped out some lime, smearing it on Guddavva's betel leaf.

'Attha,' said Sakku Chinnamma looking at Guddavva fold the betel leaf expertly, and tuck it into her left chick. 'You are so fond of children. You are always making something for them to eat. You tell them stories. You play with them, you make them laugh. You are happy when they are happy. When they are sad, the day hangs heavily on you. Why do you love children so?'

'You crazy one,' murmured Guddavva through betel-stained teeth. 'Is it possible not to like the moon? There is only one moon in the sky. See how many moons I have around me.'

A tender moonlight shone from her eyes.

We started pestering her for a story.

'The Coconut Bride,' I begged.

'The Fox and the Pig,' Peeraiah clamoured.

'The Bottle Gourd's Brain and the Goat,' Bujji pleaded.

'I shall tell you a new story today,' said Guddavva. And Vasantha promptly clambered on to her lap.

Guddavva said: Long long ago, there was a widow called Aakasamma. She had two sons. The elder one was called Suranna and the younger one Chandranna. Aakasamma had to work very hard to bring up her fatherless sons. She sent them to school, she taught them many arts.

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One day, the sons came up to their mother and said, 'Amma! If we have your consent, we would like to see the world.'

'You two are like two eyes. If you go away, what is to become of me?' sobbed Aakasamma. (Sakku Chinnamma's eyes filled up at this. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes with her pallu.)

'It's only fair that we put our education to some use. Let us go. We promise to return in year's time. Please give us your blessings.'

'If you are so determined to go, how can I refuse you?' asked Aakasamma. 'But take care, my children. May success be yours.' And then she added, 'Remember to come back and marry your uncle's daughters, Pagatamma and Reyamma.'

So the brothers set off on their travels— Suranna set off eastwards, while Chandranna travelled west.

After touring several kingdoms in the east, Suranna reached Indrapastha, which was ruled by Raja Vanapastha. Now, Raja Vanapastha had seven beautiful daughters. The princesses declared that they would marry the man who would bring the seven flowers in seven colours from Indraloka.

The Raja had an announcement made in every street corner: Listen, listen! Raja Vanapastha will give his daughters in marriage to the hero who brings the magical flowers from Indraloka. He will also crown him Raja and give his new son-in-law half his kingdom.

Of the many princes who journeyed to the kingdom of the gods, several died after being bitten by the poisonous snakes that guarded the seven heavenly flowers. Others returned empty-handed but glad that they were at least alive.

Many days went by. The royal drums announced the challenge every day.

As days went by, the king began to panic. No prince had returned victorious. But the princesses still wanted only a man who could bring the seven flowers in seven colours from Indraloka.

Now it happened that Suranna heard the announcement. Straight he proceeded to the kingdom of the gods. He shot a string of arrows and built a stairway to the kingdom of gods!

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Surana entered devalokam. He pierced the eyes of the seven poisonous snakes with his arrows. He plucked the seven flowers and descended the stairs hurriedly. Indrapastha was agog with the news of the young man who has come back triumphant. People flocked in thousands to witness the rare spectacle. Suranna placed the flowers before the king on a golden platter. The people applauded. The flowers shone like stars, and their fragrance filled the air. The king gave his daughters in marriage to Suranna, and also crowned him the king half his kingdom.

Guddavva continued:

Now, while all these was happening in the east, Chandranna, who had travelled extensively in the west was passing through a dense forest in his horse. In that forest, lived a rishi with his beautiful daughter. A brahmarakshasa had been pestering the rishi to give his daughter in marriage to him. One day when the rishi was not in his ashram, the brahmarakshasa kidnapped his daughter and carried her away beyond the seven seas and hid her in the branches of a banyan tree!

Chandranna, who was passing by, stopped for a drink of water. Dismounting from his horse he walked up to the rishi's ashram and saw the rishi deeply distressed.

Is something wrong? asked Chandranna.

The rishi told him what had happened. If you rescue my daughter from the brahmarakshasa's clutches, I will give her in marriage to you, said the rishi.

Chandranna mounted his horse, and riding beyond the seven mountains and the seven seas, reached the banyan tree. (Vasantha, who was sitting in Guddavva's lap, clutched Guddavva in fear.)

On seeing Chandranna, the Brahmaraksha jumped on him with a roar. Chandranna leapt at the brahmarakshasa. The brahamarakshasa caught Chandranna and flung him away. Chandranna somehow got up to his feet, and, dusting his clothes, jumped at the Brahmarakshasa again. This time, the brahamarakshasa uprooted a tamarind tree and threw it at Chandranna. (Afraid that the tamarind tree would fall on me, I ducked from its path.) Chandranna swiftly stepped away. Then he uprooted a banyan tree and flung it towards brahmarakshasa. The brahmarakshasa threw a huge boulder at Chandranna this time. Chandranna replied with a whole mountain! A fierce battle was fought, lasting seven days. At the end, Chandranna wrung the brahmarakshasa's neck who screamed a most horrible scream before falling lifelessly on the ground.

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The rishi gave his daughter in marriage to Chandranna.

The sons and their wives went to Aakasamma, and she said , 'My sons, I want you to get married to your mama's daughters also.' So, Chandranna married Reyamma. Even today, he lives with Reyamma for fifteen days in a month. The other fifteen days are spent with the rishi's daughter. This is why half of the month is dark, and other half, bright.

As for Suranna, he married Pagatamma. Suranna's seven wives started disliking Pagatamma, especially because Aakasamma had bestowed the status of the eldest daughter-in-law upon Pagatamma. This was reason enough for the seven sisters to hate their mother-in-law too.

The days however passed peacefully.

Then, one day, Aakasamma fell seriously ill. The vaidyudu told her sons to churn the sea and bring back the extracted buttermilk for Aakasamma to drink. The brothers set off with a silver churning stick and a pot each.

Chandranna went straight to his mother with the buttermilk. Suranna, however, went to his seven wives first. Unknown to Suranna, they mixed chilli powder in the buttermilk. Aakasamma drank the buttermilk that Chandranna had brought her and her stomach was filled with calm.

My son! You soothed my stomach with cool buttermilk. May you live happily with your wives. Not only that you will brighten the world with moonlight and everybody will love you for it, Aakasamma blessed.

Aakasamma then drank the buttermilk that Suranna got her. Her stomach was aflame. Burning with anger, Aakasamma cursed Suranna without thinking. How dare you burn my stomach! You will always be blazing hot. And everybody will curse you for the scorching hot sun that you will be. At this Suranna's wives came running, and fell at their mother-in-law's feet. We are to blame, they cried. Your son is innocent. We mixed chilli powder in buttermilk. So it was you, said Aakasamma. Because you caused hurt, you seven sisters will only come together only on the days it rains and that is when you'll live with Suranna also.

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(‘Have you noticed the rainbow after rain? The seven colours in the rainbow are the seven sisters. And they come together briefly only after rain,’ explained Guddavva, while, ‘That’s why they say a mother’s curse runs its course,’ said Sakku Chinamma, with a huge sigh.)

But Aakasamma was deeply grieved that she had cursed her innocent son. She cried bitterly, saying, I am not a mother! I deserve to die for what I have done! And she ran to the top of a cliff and prepared to jump. Just then lord Shiva and Parvathi, who were passing through the sky in their chariot, spotted Aakasamma.

Stop chariot my Lord! A woman is trying to jump off that cliff there, cried Parvathiamma.

Aakasamma was just about to jump off the cliff when when Parvathidevi caught hold of her pallu and stopped her.

On seeing Lord Siva and Parvathi, Aakasamma gave vent to her anguish and, between sobs, narrated what had happened.

Neither you nor your son is at fault. It is all god's game. They say everything happens for your own good. Your elder son will give light to all. Your younger son will shower moonlight. If we are invisible gods then your sons are the visible gods! Consoled Parvathi before she and Shiva climbed back into their chariot and went back to their abode among the gods.

And happily Aakasamma returned home.

Here ends our story. It is now time for us to go home,' ended Guddavva.

We got up one by one. The crane that perched on the tamarind tree, stood up and flapped its wings. The milky moonlight showered down.

Moonlight flooded my face. The moon, like a butterball in a pot of buttermilk, would plunge down one moment, and reappear the next.

'Beware, I am going to steal you today!' I said, looking at the moon at the sky.

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### **Comprehension 1**

Read carefully the paragraph beginning with 'The rakshasas...', and answer the following questions as briefly as possible.

1. What do the rakshasas do when they see Guddavva's stick?
2. How do the gods treat Guddavva?
3. What do birds and animals do when they listen to Guddavva's stories?
4. Why does the narrator say that Guddavva was a sorceress?
5. What does the paragraph tell us about Guddavva's skill as a story-teller?

### **Comprehension 2**

Read carefully the paragraph beginning with 'Aakasamma then ...', and answer the following questions as briefly as possible.

1. Why did Aakasamma curse her son?
2. What was her curse?
3. Who had done the mischief? 4. What had they done?
5. How did Aakasamma curse her daughters-in-law?

### **Discussion 1**

1. Who do you think is the narrator of the story? Who is the main character in the story? How is the narrator related to him / her?
2. What were the 'stars' that the narrator collected from the tree?
3. What is Guddavva's story about fireflies?

4. Why did the narrator want to pluck the moon? What did Guddavva promise? Did she keep her promise?

**Discussion 2**

1. Describe Guddavva's skill as a story-teller.

2. Narrate briefly the story of Guddavva's own life.

3. Narrate briefly Guddavva's story about the Sun and the Moon.

4. What are Guddavva's stories about? Narrate one of them briefly and explain how it describes a natural phenomenon in a folktale fashion.