

22 Tamil Folk Tales
Collected in *Panaiyakkottai, Thanjavur District*

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1. A MOSQUITO'S STORY

A mosquito dressed up in her bangles, her finest silk sari and a long braid, and went around looking for a husband. She searched everywhere, until a young bull asked her, "Hey, sweetie! Where're you going?" "I'm looking for a good husband, that's what." "Why not marry me?" "What can you do?" asked the mosquito. "They plough the fields with me all day. At night they tie me up; then I eat straw, sleep and make dung."

"You won't do at all," said the mosquito and continued her search. Four hoes appeared and asked, "Miss Mosquito! Hey, Beautiful! Where are you going?" "I'm looking for a good man to marry." "Marry me!" said one of the hoes. "What can you do?" "I work hard. I dig up soil, cut grass and everything in sight. In the evening they throw me in a corner; I go to sleep and get up in the morning." [laughter] "You're not what I want either."

Another day passed, and this time a group of rats appeared; among them was a lame rat who asked the mosquito, "Where are you going, lovely mosquito?" "I'm looking for a husband." "Marry me, marry me," said the lame rat. "What can you do?" asked the mosquito. "I can earn a good living. I'll bring you whatever you want - cooking oil, water, clothes - everything. Besides, I've seen the whole world." "Then you're the right man for me. I'll marry you."

They married and lived a happy family life, but soon troubles arose. When they fought with each other, the mosquito cried and got angry with her rat husband. One day he asked for water and she brought it, but when he drank it - you know how rats drink by inhaling quickly - well, she was sucked right up into his nose! She went in there and died!

She was dead, and nothing could be done. The other rats cried for a while and then collected sticks and made a bier and carried the bones to the ocean. Got to follow all the rituals, you know. When the bier was put in the river, the water became dirty, at the very spot where a wild elephant used to drink.

When the elephant came to drink and saw the water, it said, "You're normally clear; what happened, Mr River?" "Haven't you heard?" said the river. "The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones, put them in the water and now I'm all dirty."

When it heard this, the elephant broke off one of its tusks in sympathy and lay under a date palm to sleep. The tree asked, "Oh, brother elephant, why are you coming here with a broken and bloody tusk?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; so I broke off one of my tusks." "Then I'll drop all my leaves," said the tree and it did.

Next a crow came and sat on the tree, as it always did, and said, "You're completely leafless! Where am I going to sit?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; so I dropped all my leaves." "In that case, I'll pluck out my eye." And till this day you can see that the crow has a damaged eye.

The crow always sat on a certain wall and when it did, the wall asked, "Why is your eye dripping with blood?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; the tree dropped its leaves; so I plucked out my eye." "Then, I'll fall down," said the wall and it did.

Now, a farmer's wife used to walk that way, carrying her husband's lunch in a bundle on her head; when she saw the wall in a heap, she said, "You have stood here so long, wall! Why have you collapsed?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; the tree dropped its leaves; the crow plucked out its eye; so I collapsed." "Then I'll throw this food on the ground and run away. So what if he doesn't get his food, after all that has happened!" she said and threw the food away.

Back home, when her husband asked about the food, she replied, "So much has happened," and told him the long story. When he heard all that, the man said, "I'm not going to plough any more," and broke his plough. Then his son asked, "Why have you come home so early today, father?" "Haven't you heard? The mosquito, Mrs Rat, died; they collected the bones; put them in the water; the water became dirty; the elephant broke off its tusk; the tree dropped its leaves; the crow plucked out its eye; the wall collapsed; your mother threw away the food; so I broke my plough." "In that case, I'm not going to school!" said the boy and broke his slate.

However, he went to school anyway, just for fun. When his teacher saw him and asked why he had come without his slate, the boy told him the whole story about the mosquito. "Then I'm going to burn down this school; I've got no work here," said the teacher. So he burned down the school and ran out of town. That's the end of the story.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

2. LOOSE BOWELS

A man had two sons, named Little Kali and Big Kali. Neither had any idea what "rice" was - they were that stupid. A Brahmin, an Aiyar, hired the older brother, telling Mm, "If you bring ten bundles of firewood and eight bundles of grass, I'll feed you a banyan tree leaf full of rice every day." But how much rice does a banyan leaf hold?

Still, the older brother wanted that "rice" badly, though he didn't know what it was, so he went to the Aiyar's house. He collected the firewood and grass and was given just one handful of rice on a little banyan tree leaf. How could he manage on that tiny amount of food? He couldn't, and eventually, working hard and eating little, he began to waste away. Finally, he went back home in that emaciated condition and told his younger brother to go and work for the Aiyar.

When the younger went to him, the Aiyar again said, "If you bring ten bundles of firewood and eight bundles of grass, I'll feed you a banyan tree leaf full of rice." So the younger brother agreed and went to work. He worked hard, like his brother, but he did things a little differently. He made ten tiny bundles of wood, equal to one normal bundle, tied up each with rope and brought them back to the Aiyar. After all, the man had said "ten bundles", hadn't he? Well, he got ten bundles.

The younger brother did the same with the grass: he split one bundle into eight tiny ones. And for his food, he stitched together fifty banyan tree leaves, so that he had an enormous leaf! After work, he put that leaf down and asked for his food, but even all the rice cooked for the Aiyar's family wasn't enough to fill that huge leaf! As he ate, he teased the family, "C'mon! Fill my leaf! I'm still hungry."

The Aiyar's wife watched all this and later said to her husband, "He's eating us out of house and home! Tomorrow take him along to daughter's house and see that he gets what he deserves!" The next day the Aiyar said to his servant, "Come along with me; I'm going to ride over to my daughter's house for a few days." His plan was to kill him on the way, since he was ruining them little by little!

On the way to the daughter's house, the Aiyar felt tired and told the young man to give the horse a bath while he had a nap. As he lay down under a tree, the young man cut off the horse's ears and tail and shooed the horse off into the forest. You see, the Aiyar might have wanted to harm him, but he had decided to get back at the Aiyar for trying to starve his brother and him. So he took the horse's ears and tails and stuck them in the mud, as if the horse had sunk below, into the mud.

Then he waited for the Aiyar to awake; when he did and asked for the horse, the young man said, "I washed it all over, but it sank deep into the mud! You grab the tail and pull hard and I'll grab the ears. We'll pull it out together."

"Right," said the Aiyar who grabbed the horse's tail, held it firmly and then pulled as hard as he could - and fell backwards right into the muck! "Oh, sir!" said the man, "The horse is lost; it's gone right down into the mud and died!" "Don't worry about the horse; I've got to clean my clothes. You go ahead - see my daughter's house over there, the big house - go and tell her to cook me a nice meal. I'm famished."

At the house, the man spoke to the Brahmin's daughter, "I came with your father but he's taking a bath and said that you should cook him a meal. He wants a soup of old millet." The daughter thought her father had developed some strange food habits in his old age, but she shrugged it off and found old, dirty millet, full of insects. She

cooked it in a hurry, because her father wanted it soon, and didn't worry about the insects or dirt.

When her father arrived, he swallowed the whole bowl to satisfy his hunger. Before long his stomach ached and he went to the toilet all night long. He thought his daughter must be in deep poverty: "I asked her to make me something really nice and she cooks this rotten stuff! Poor thing. Her husband gets a good salary but apparently doesn't give her anything." The Aiyar really suffered that night; he couldn't sleep and could hardly walk, but he had to go back and forth to the bathroom all night.

Then the young man said to him, "Sir, here's an idea. Take this big gourd, go in it and then empty it in the pond early in the morning. After that we'll go back home." The exhausted Aiyar agreed and filled up the gourd with his waste. At dawn he took the gourd and snuck off as if to take a bath, but at that moment, the young man said to the daughter, "Look! Your father has left in a huff! He didn't say anything all night long. Better go and call him back." She ran after him, calling, "Father, come back! Come back!"

She even grabbed his hand, but he tried to get rid of her: "Let me go bathe; I'll come right back." But she wouldn't let him go. What could he do? He couldn't say, "I'm going to empty this gourd full of crap?" could he? "I'll be back in a moment; let me go," he pleaded. "No! Don't leave when you're upset like this, father," she kept on saying. "At least eat something before going back home." "No! I've got to bathe." She pulled this way, he pulled that way and eventually the gourd tipped, spilling the excrement all over him. "You see, my stomach's upset and I've got to go bathe. It's not your fault; that servant of mine has caused all this trouble. After I bathe, I'm going to take care of him!"

That night he talked with his daughter and son-in-law, "Look at the mischief he's created! Unbelievable things!" In the end, they decided to kill him in his sleep. Now, the man, who was sleeping on the verandah, overheard all this; so he quickly wrapped his veshti around a calf, left it on the verandah and climbed up into the rafters. The Aiyar came at the sleeping body with a sharp knife, muttering, "You bastard! You almost ruined me, but I'm going to get rid of you now!" He struck hard, right into the calf. "Better stab him a few more times; then I'll be sure he's gone," he thought and stabbed the calf over and over. He didn't know it was a calf, so when he lifted off the veshti and saw the dead animal, he screamed in horror.

From the rafters, came a voice: "Oh, I see! You Aiyars eat cow meat only at midnight in the agraharam?" [laughter! "What! Are you still alive! And now I've lost something else - this calf. My family is ruined; my horse is dead and this calf is dead!"

While the Aiyar beat his breast in grief, the young man said, "Here's a bit of advice. Tie up its legs, put it around your neck and then walk along that path over there, where no one will see you, and throw it into the pond. If you see anyone, just run back here."

So the Aiyar's son-in-law tied up the calf, hoisted it onto the old man's shoulders and off he went. When they left the house, the young man put on a new veshti and ran ahead of them - you see, he wanted to cause him even more trouble. When the Aiyar saw him - remember the old man was carrying a lot of weight - the Brahmin said, "What'd you come for?" "There's some people coming this way toward the pond. Better go that way." So the Brahmin lugged the calf in the opposite direction, where

the man reappeared and the Aiyar said, "Now what?" "Someone's coming this way."
"Oh, then I can't bury the animal here."

Back and forth went the Aiyar, carrying the calf. Finally, the young man began to pity the Aiyar and said, "Who cares what they think? I'll bury it for you." And so he did and the story ended happily.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

3. THE BOUQUET

In a kingdom lived a raja and his minister, and each had a son. When it was time to crown his son, the raja told him he should get married. To this the son replied, "Let me first see the world, then I'll be ready for marriage. I'm not ready now." The raja agreed, gave his son and the minister's son a bag of money and a horse each, and bade them farewell, saying, "Go and see the wide world and then return for your coronation. But, you, young minister! You must protect my son carefully; a thorn in his foot should be like a thorn in your eye!"

They traveled widely, visiting many places, and one night they lay down to sleep outside a temple. The minister held the prince's head in his lap as they slept, just as the raja had ordered. Early in the morning, the minister woke, gently lowered the prince's head to the ground, and walked around the temple toward the tank. On his way, he saw a beautiful sculpture on the temple wall, a stone sculpture of a woman holding a bouquet of flowers. She stood there as if she was offering the flowers to you! He was fascinated with the sculpture but thought, "If the prince sees this, he'll never leave this spot. If I find her beautiful, he'll be completely infatuated! I've got to prevent him from seeing her."

When he returned to the temple, the prince asked him where he'd been. "I went to look around the temple. Take a look, but don't go to the north wall." The prince walked around the temple, looking at all the images of the gods, and then said to himself, "Why should I listen to what he says?" and went to the north wall. As soon as he saw the sculpture, he was overwhelmed. He stood in front of the woman and said, "Give me the bouquet! Give me the bouquet!"

After an hour had passed, the minister wondered where the prince was and went to find him. There he was, still dumbstruck in front of the sculpture. "Oh, no! He's lost now!" thought the minister, who said to the prince, "That's only a picture. Forget it. We've got to go, travel back to your father." But the prince wouldn't listen and just stood there repeating, "Give me the bouquet! Give me the bouquet!" He neither ate nor moved; and his only thought was to take the woman with him. He was that much in love, completely fixated.

After two days of this, the minister decided it couldn't go on any longer and called the temple priest. "Watch over the prince; here's some money for you," he said. "Now tell me, where is the woman in the sculpture? And who is the sculptor?" "She lives across the seven seas, in a Chettiyar merchant's family; seeing one of her hairs, a sculptor made this image. If you cross the seven seas, you'll find her," said the priest. "I'm off. You must watch him carefully; that's your duty."

The minister rode for a long time, until he saw a cobra in a tree eating two baby chicks just hatched in a bird's nest; every day the bird laid two eggs and every day the snake broke the eggs and ate the babies. The snake kept on devouring this family, day after day. When the minister saw the snake slither into the nest, he realised what was happening, killed the snake with his sword and turned it into a mountain, a high mountain.

When the two chicks survived, they said to the minister - they are the kind of birds who can speak at birth - "Who are you, great saviour, who has rescued us from this historic destruction of our race! Tell us what you want and our parents will grant it." "I've got to cross the seven seas, you see..." but how could he tell the whole truth to the birds? "Please take me over the waters." "We'll do that. Just hide here so that our

parents don't see you; they are very fierce and might bite. Wait till we call you; don't come out till then."

After he hid, the parent birds came, crying because more of their chicks would have been killed; but when they saw them alive, they were overjoyed and said excitedly, "Do you know how long it's been since I've seen one of my children alive! Wonderful!" "Mother, father. Promise that you won't kill anyone." "We promise," the parent birds said. "Look over there at that mountain; that's what's been devouring our family for so long. A young man has saved us and you must carry him across the seven seas. If you refuse, we will never eat again; you must do it, right now." The parents agreed, "We'll do whatever you wish, children; you are everything to us. Tell us what to do and it's done. Even if you wish us to fast, we will do it for you."

The birds called the minister and asked him what he wanted. When he said he wanted to be taken across the seven seas, they agreed and he climbed on the wings of the parent birds. As they flew over the third or fourth sea, he thought, "How can I present myself to the Chettiyar? Can't just show up without a good reason." Looking down, he saw rubies, emeralds and diamonds, and said to the birds, "I've got to go to the toilet, please put me down for a moment." They did, and he went into the forest like he was going to the toilet, but he filled his pockets with these jewels. Rich as a gem merchant, he climbed back on to the birds and flew off.

They crossed the seventh sea and set him down on the shore. "Here's a little rod," they said. "Whenever you want I'll come and take you back. Just hold this rod in your hands as if you're praying, and we'll return." After the birds left, the minister hawked his wares like a merchant. In that region, only the Chettiyar, whose daughter he was searching for, had the wealth to buy such precious gems. Soon the Chettiyar called him to his house, bought some of his gems and then said, "You may stay here, until you go back home." "I've left home for good," said the minister, as part of his secret plan, "and I have no plans to go anywhere." "In that case," said the Chettiyar, "stay in our house and eat with us."

So he stayed in the Chettiyar's house, but after some time, he said, "May I build a small house for my wife to live in when she comes?" "Of course, why not!" He paid for the land with the remaining jewels and the house was built; without the Chettiyar's knowing, however, the minister had a tunnel dug that connected his house with the room where the Chettiyar's daughter slept. When he went through the tunnel to her room, she fell in love with him. Next day she told her father she was ill and wanted to lie down in her room, but she went through the tunnel; the Chettiyar knew absolutely nothing about this and thought his daughter was lying down in her room whenever she visited the minister's house.

One day the minister said to the Chettiyar, "My wife has arrived from her village. Please come and eat a meal with us." The Chettiyar ate with them, but after he left he had a funny feeling that his friend's wife looked a lot like his own daughter, but he couldn't be sure. "Who can say? There are so many women in this world! Besides, he says she's his wife," he muttered in confusion.

This went on for a while: the daughter would go to the minister's house and then return and lie down in her room, pretending to her father that she had been ill. Soon the minister told her that they must return to his own kingdom. He also asked the Chettiyar to bid them farewell.

On the very last day, when he was eating in the minister's house, the Chettiyar, who was still suspicious, got an idea: "I'll smear a little ghee on her sari as she passes by

and when I get home, I'll check my daughter's sari. That way, I'll know if she is my daughter or not." Putting some ghee in his hand, he smeared some on the woman's sari as she passed by. The minister, however, saw this and later told her to take off her stained sari and wear another just like it when she went home. "Lie down like nothing's happened and your father will believe it's you."

When she returned, her father said, "Daughter, that's a beautiful sari you're wearing; expensive silk, isn't it? Let's take a look." "Yes, father," she said - she wanted to fool him, of course. Looking at the sari, he examined the spot where he had smeared ghee, but the sari was perfectly clean. "That woman really is his wife! And this is my daughter," he said to himself and cleared his suspicions.

The next morning she went very early to the minister's house and got ready to leave with him as his wife. When the Chettiyar knew they were leaving, he gave them a send off. They all stood on the seashore, with the minister holding the rod in his hand; and when he prayed the birds came. The minister and the Chettiyar's daughter each climbed on a bird and flew off, as the Chettiyar wished them well. When he entered his house, however, his daughter was gone! He beat his head and his chest, screaming, "He cheated me!"

Meanwhile, when the minister and the woman reached the temple, he said to the birds, "Thank you for all your help; you have done us a great favour. Without you, the prince would never recover." After the birds flew off, he brought the woman to the temple and gave her a bouquet of flowers. "Hold this," he said, "and when the prince says, 'Give me the bouquet,' give it to him. Next he'll ask about me, and you must say I'm dead."

She held the flowers and when the prince said, "Give me the bouquet," she merged with the sculpture - you couldn't tell them apart - and gave him the bouquet. At that moment, when he received the flowers, the prince came to his senses and asked, "Where is my minister?" "Oh, he died some time ago," she answered. "He died after bringing me such a beautiful woman! He's left me alone in this isolated place," he cried and died on the spot. "The prince, who was to be my husband, is dead! I can't live any more," she said and died, too.

Now there were three corpses outside the temple. And when the pusari, the priest, came for puja and saw the prince, the minister and the woman lying dead, he also committed suicide!

Now, sir, which of those deaths are justified and which are not? Who should have died and who not?

Man no. 1 in audience: When people tell stories they often ask questions like this.

Man no. 2: Well, let's see... I think the prince's death is right; after the person who did so much for him died, he felt that he couldn't live. His death was justified. I don't know about the others.

Woman no. 1: The pusari's death is also right.

Storyteller: Not the pusari! What's he got to do with it? He's supposed to perform the puja, not die with them. The prince died because of the minister, and the princess died because of the prince - that's all as it should be. But the pusari should clear off the bodies and get on with his work. Why should he die?

Woman no. 1: That's right; he just wanted to join the crowd, after seeing the others lying on the ground.

Storyteller: So the prince's death is right, but the pusari's is not.

Man no. 3: What about the minister and the princess?

Storyteller: No, sir, not the minister. The raja told him to look after his son like his own life.

Man no. 2: The minister - he's the one who did the most wrong.

Storyteller: That's right. He told the lie about being dead. If he hadn't told her to say that, no one would have died.

Man no. 2: You tell stories really well. Do you tell this story a lot?

Storyteller: Yes.

Man no. 2: And when you ask the question at the end, do people get the answer right?

Storyteller: Some do and some don't. Mostly they don't understand.

Man no. 2: Then do you tell them?

Storyteller: No. I ask them questions: "How did the raja die? How did the minister?" I tell them to think and then give an answer. Some say the death of pusari is proper, some say the minister, and so on. I tell the kids to think about it and tell me later.

Man no. 2: Oh, I see. That way, when they can't get the answer right, you can get out of telling the next story and do your housework.

Storyteller [laughing]: Exactly. I can trick them and escape to do some housework, and also get out of having to tell another story.

Man no. 3: Do men and women give different answers or the same?

Storyteller: They answer individually. I can't see any difference. The older people get mad if I don't give them the answer. "Hey, you can't keep silent!" they say. "Tell us!" Then I say, "You kept saying 'um' [as respondent] during the whole story but you didn't follow a word, did you?" That's what I say.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

4. KILLING THE MONKEY-HUSBAND

Six brothers lived with their little sister, who was lame. On her way to school one day, she played in the woods with other children and they all climbed a tree. When the school bell rang, the children climbed down and ran off, all except the lame girl, who couldn't get down. Left all alone, she cried, "Help me! Help me down!" but no one would help. They all said, "You're lame; why did you climb up?" and left her there in the tree.

Then a monkey came by and she said, "Monkey, please help me down." "I will, if you will marry me," he said. "I can't do that, but please help me." "Only if you marry me," he repeated and in the end she agreed. He got her down and took her to his house. Meanwhile, her six brothers searched everywhere but couldn't find her and returned home.

The sister got married to the monkey and then said, "I want to go back and see my parents for a day." She went first to her oldest brother's house, but he didn't recognise her at all because she was all dressed up as a bride. He thought he recognised her hair, yet he wasn't sure. When he asked her what she wanted, she sang this sad song:

I went to pluck fruits, anne,
as pretty as a parrot was I;
I married a magic monkey, *anne*,
and now I've come home.

She sang this song, but her brother understood nothing. It was the same with the second brother. But when she went to her mother and she sang the same song, using *amma* for "mother" instead of *anne* for "brother", her mother immediately understood and embraced her daughter.

When the girl described everything that had happened with the monkey, her mother told her to invite her husband to their house. After she left to bring the monkey, her family laid out gifts for the newlyweds: silk veshtis and shirts, and silk saris. They also dug a deep pit and heated boiling water. The daughter said to the monkey, "Come to my house; they want to celebrate our marriage for us."

When they arrived at her house, her family sat the monkey down, rubbed him in oil and told him to get in the pit. "What's the pit for?" asked the monkey. "Oh, that's the way we celebrate weddings in our family," they said. They put him in the pit and poured water all over him, and he died.

Storyteller: Kalaicelvi

5. A DOG'S STORY

Once a woman raised a dog with great affection. Then both she and the dog got pregnant at the same time. But the woman ate all the kohikkattai cakes and gave none to her dog, who got very angry and said, "You've eaten all the cakes and given me none! All right, but I curse you to give birth to four puppies!" Cursing her like this, the dog left.

Sure enough, the woman had four puppies, while the dog herself gave birth to two human daughters. The dog raised her daughters well, taking them to the river to bathe and clothing them by stealing clothes drying on the river bank. Her daughters grew up to be very beautiful.

One day a raja came hunting that way and asked them for water; when the daughters gave him some, he was infatuated with the beauty of these dog-girls and took them away with him. The mother dog was distraught, but the younger girl had torn off pieces of a sari and dropped them along the way to the raja's town so that her mother would know where they were; the younger one loved her mother that much. But the older sister was very proud and the raja didn't marry her. Instead, he let his minister marry her.

During the marriage celebrations, the mother dog went there and began to cry, "Oh, my little daughter! You're gone, but you left these signs for me!" Outside the mother howled, while inside the younger daughter recognised her voice and welcomed her in; she fed her and did everything for her. Then she said to her mother, "Don't go near older sister's house; she's too proud and won't look after you. You should stay here." "How can I not see her? I'll go see her for a little while," the dog said and went to see her other daughter.

Her house was also celebrating a marriage, but when the dog arrived and started to howl, just as she had at the younger daughter's, the older daughter said, "What a nuisance! That flea-bitten bitch is making a racket!" She beat the dog, gave it nothing to eat and said, "Get out of here. If my husband sees you, he'll kill you. Get lost!"

The injured dog dragged itself back to the younger daughter's house and said, "I'm going to die. After I'm dead, put me in a bundle and tie it in the rafters above the swing. I say this for your own good; it'll teach you about what's good and what's bad. And if anyone asks what's in the bundle, just say it's the dowry your mother gave you." The mother soon died and the younger daughter tied her in a bundle hanging from the rafters.

Now her husband was dying with curiosity to know what was in that bundle and kept on asking himself, "What could it be? What's in that bundle?" but he didn't say anything for a long time. Then one day he asked his wife about the bundle and she said, "Oh, my mother gave it to me as dowry." He took it down, opened the bundle and saw it was full of diamonds and gold! "Let's see how much it is," he said. "Go to your sister and get a measuring vessel." When the older sister heard about the treasure, she asked how it had happened and the younger sister explained: "When you beat and killed mother, I kept her in a bundle above our swing. That's how I got this dowry from her."

"I see!" said the older sister. "I'm going to do the same thing." She ran out into the street, killed a dog and hung it up. Of course, the younger sister had treated her mother like a god and had done everything for her. But if you snatch some dog off the street and hang it up, what are you going to get? Gold?

Soon the dead dog began to smell horribly, and her husband asked, "What's that hanging up there? It stinks!" "It's the dowry my mother gave me," she said. "Look inside; it'll be full of diamonds and gold." When he did, he found a rotting dog's corpse, threw it away and scolded his wife.

Later the younger daughter said to her husband, "Mother gave us all this; we should go see her." So she took him and set out, but she lost her nerve: "She's dead. How am I going to find her?" Then to her husband she said, "Wait for a moment. I'll be back soon." Pretending to go to pee, she went behind a bush and thrust her hand into a snake-hole, hoping to kill herself. But at that very moment, the snake was having a baby, a very painful birth, and the baby-snake landed in her hand. She cleaned the mother snake after the birth and held the baby.

Then the mother snake said, "What's the matter?" "I'm an orphan, my mother died; I've left my husband nearby and wanted to die so I stuck my hand in your hole." "Don't think such thoughts," said the snake. "You helped me in my hour of need and now I'll give you something. I'll give you a golden necklace, in the shape of a woman like your mother. Take it home and live with your husband. When she took the necklace and showed it to her husband, they were happy again.

One day, while she was eating at her sister's house, the older sister heard about the necklace. "How'd you get that?" she asked. "I put my hand in a snake-hole and it protected me," said her sister. What did the older sister do? She went to her husband and said, "Come on. We'll go find my mother." Halfway, she told him to wait while she walked a little distance and put her hand in a snake-hole. The cobra bit her and she fell down dead.

Man in audience: Who do you tell this story to?

Storyteller (Vijayalakshmi): To these girls [the other tellers] sitting here.

Girls (Kalaichelvi and Alli): Yes, to us.

Man: Why do you tell this story?

Storyteller: To teach them that we should respect our mothers. [all laugh] Just look how the dog suffered, taking the clothes from the river bank to give to her girls.

Alli, youngest teller: In our house, my sister here is the big one who drives out the mother, but I am the little sister who thinks, "She may be a dog, but she's still our mother."

Man: I see. So you two sisters fight for your mother's attention?

Girls: Of course we do!

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

6. POISON HIM, MARRY HIM

There was a raja, a powerful raja, who battled with all the neighbouring kings. When he died and left behind a five-year-old son, all his enemies plotted to conquer his powerful kingdom. "We'll find his heir wherever he is, kill him and take over the kingdom!" That was their plan. They decided to look for a boy without a silver belt on his waist, entice him with food and then check with the astrologer that he was the raja's son. When they caught him in this way, they would kill him.

When the townspeople heard of this, however, they wanted to save the boy because they respected the raja. They gave the little boy to a gypsy, a Kuratti, who smuggled him out of the town in a basket and then left him in the wild, thinking that he would somehow survive. The other rajas, led by the big raja and his astrologer, were looking for him everywhere.

Meanwhile, another raja was hunting and heard the baby's cries; this poor raja was a tributary of the raja who wanted to kill the boy. After the poor raja took the boy and raised him in his land, his prosperity grew so he could pay his tributary tax on time every year. The big raja was surprised: "He always used to ask for a loan. This is strange." He sent spies to that kingdom, and the people there said truthfully that ever since their king had found a baby in the forest the kingdom had prospered. The big raja understood who the baby was and was determined to kill it. He had been trying for years to kill it but hadn't been able to.

About this time, when the boy was nearly fifteen years old, the big raja paid a visit to the tributary raja, who welcomed him in surprise: "What brings you here? I've paid my tribute." "Nothing like that. I just came to look at your kingdom, to pay a small visit. But I wish you would send your boy to my kingdom for a while." "Yes, of course," said the tributary raja - after all, he was now the rich one and could be magnanimous. "Good. I've got some business elsewhere. Just send him to my palace with this letter," said the big raja. Thinking that the big raja would shower his son with gifts at his palace, the tributary raja got a horse ready for the boy and sent him off with the letter.

When the boy reached the palace after a long journey, he felt tired, tied up his horse at a tree near a pool and fell asleep. The big raja's daughter, named Visai, came to bathe at that pool with her friends. When they saw a man sleeping there, they went over to see what he looked like. Seeing the letter in his bag, they took it out and read: "This is my enemy; poison him immediately." The princess thought, "What's this? He looks like a good man! Why would my father order him to be killed?" So she took a pen and added a small curl to one letter and a half circle to another. Now the letter read: "This is my friend; marry him to Visai immediately." She folded up the letter and put it back in his bag.

When the young man arrived at the palace and delivered the letter, the palace was surprised: "The raja has ordered the marriage at short notice indeed!" But the letter was clear and the groom seemed appropriate, so they quickly made the proper arrangements. Of course, all this was the daughter's work, but no one knew that, especially since the writing was her father's.

All the townspeople were invited to the wedding, the ceremonies were duly celebrated and the couple were very happy together. When the father arrived, he was shocked! "What is this!" he screamed at his daughter. "What did that letter say? And what have you done?" "I did nothing wrong, father. You wrote that he was your

friend and that I should marry him. That's what I did. It's all in your handwriting. The boy had nothing to do with it himself."

"I can't let him get away now," thought the raja, who decided that he would kill him somehow. So he summoned him and said, "Boy, there's a custom in our country that you and your bride should light the temple lamp." Then he sent four men with orders to cut off the head of the first person who entered the temple with coconuts and oil for the lamp.

The young bridegroom went to the temple with the puja things, but the raja had also sent his own son there to give him a message. When the raja's son arrived at the temple, he said to his brother-in-law, "Let me take the coconut and oil. I'll light it and come back." When the raja's son entered, they cut off his head in one blow, just as the raja had ordered. When he didn't return for a while, the raja went to look for him. Seeing him cut in two, he thought, "God! Nothing turns out as I planned. I can't kill that boy; but I have killed my own son!"

He had lost everything - his daughter and his son - and he fell to the ground in anguish. The boy was made raja of his father's kingdom, and the other raja stood empty handed.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

7. THE DISFIGURED EYE

There was a raja and he had just one son. But that son got up to every kind of mischief imaginable - visiting prostitutes, gambling, cards ^ name it and he did it! How to reform him? "Better get him married to a woman from a respectable family; that should help," his family thought.

So the raja sent out his men, with the boy's photo, to search for a bride. As they wandered over the country, another group of men came from the opposite direction, with the photo of a girl whose father had sent them to look for a bridegroom. The two groups met, exchanged photos and, as everything seemed right, each party went back and made arrangements for the marriage.

The initial ceremonies were soon underway, but somehow the wedding announcements weren't sent out! The boy took the girl's photo to the prostitute's house and said, "Look at this! My parents are going to marry me to her." The dasi was eaten up by jealousy - you see, the girl in the photo was so beautiful. "I can't let this happen," she thought. "If he marries her, he'll never give me any more money." Soon they finalised the arrangements without even informing the son - he knew about it but they didn't tell him the date.

"Now, what can we do?" he said to the dasi. "My father's sealed the deal. I can't refuse now." The dasi took a needle, scratched out one eye in the photo, put lime-paste over it and said to him, "Look at this beauty you're married to! You're married to a half-blind wife!"

He didn't know what to do, but she said, "Don't sleep with her. Keep coming to me." He followed her advice and continued to visit her at night.

When his parents saw this, they thought things might improve if he and his wife lived by themselves, so they built a separate palace and set them up in it. Even then he paid no attention to his wife and gave her no pleasure; he was at home during the day and ate his meals, but he spent nights with the dasi. He completely ignored his wife, never looked at her, and so he didn't even know what she looked like. All this was due to the dasi's deceit.

One day a heavy rain fell as he was about to leave for the dasi's house; he had eaten and was standing by the door, hesitating because of the rain. It was pouring and he had no umbrella. Behind him, his wife stood, praying quietly, "If I am a chaste woman, let this little piece of my sari keep him dry." She tore off a piece of her sari, gave it to him and he left. When he entered the dasi's house, she was surprised, "Why did you come in this storm? Hey, how come you're not soaked? Not even a single drop?" He told her what his wife had said and how she had protected him. "Her chastity is powerful; I must get rid of her," she thought and put in motion an even crueller plan.

"Go back to her, eat her food and ask her to give you an: oil bath. Sleep with her, and when she's asleep, send a guard to take her into the forest and kill her." He went back and did as she said; when he asked for an oil bath and lay down to sleep with her, the poor girl was filled with desire. But he deceived her and ordered the guards to pick up her bed, take her into the forest, cut off her legs and kill her. They cut off her legs, but they didn't have the heart to kill a woman, so they left her there alive. When the guards brought back the legs, the prince kept them in the dasi's house - up in the rafters, above the door, but he didn't pay to them any attention. He thought she was dead.

When the wife awoke, she was confused, "I lay down in a palace and now I'm in a dark forest." Sitting in prayer on the bed in the middle of the darkness, she thought, "I'm all alone, no one, no help anywhere. Don't know where to go, and all the paths are thick with, thorns!" She entered into deep prayer, which disturbed the meditation of a powerful muni, who angrily cried, "What's your problem!" "I am a princess, but the prince abandoned me in the forest and did this to me. I have nowhere to go. Please help me," she pleaded. "I will send you a maid who will be your legs and look after you," the muni said and left.

One day, when the raja - the prince had become a raja now - was hunting in the forest where she lived, he got thirsty. He asked her for water, but she couldn't stand up because she had no legs, so she told the maid to get him water. He looked at the woman, very carefully, and thought she was beautiful. He came back the next day and for several days in a row; soon he was deeply in love with her. For a full year he came, but still he didn't recognise her; you see, even if he had looked at her carefully before, he wouldn't know her now because the dasi had disfigured her photo. Besides, he thought his wife was dead. She, of course, knew full well who he was. A woman knows these things.

Eventually, she gave birth to a boy; when he was five he kept asking the raja, his father, to take him back when he left the house in the forest. Finally his father agreed but his mother warned him, "If you go there, to the dasi's house, she'll try to poison you. She'll give you yogurt and buttermilk, and coax you to eat. But don't eat anything from her! Here, take this puffed rice, and keep it in your shirt pocket; as you go along, drop the rice on the ground, but don't let your father know. Later, when your father is talking with the dasi, climb quietly into the rafters, get my legs and run back here."

The next day, his father came again and hoisted his son onto his horse. They rode off, and the little boy dropped the puffed rice in a trail as they rode along to the dasi's house. She offered him milk and yogurt and other things, but he refused it all. Then he said, "I'll go play, father," and stepped outside as if to play. But he snuck back inside, climbed into the rafters, grabbed the legs and ran back home, along the path of puffed rice. His mother asked him to put the legs on her and he did with his own hands. They fit perfectly! She said a mantra, and they stuck!

When the father came back and asked about the boy, she simply said that he had returned early and kept quiet. But when he came on his horse the next day, she stood up and he was amazed! "All this time you failed to show me this kind of respect!" "What respect? I had no legs; that's why I couldn't stand. Now I've got my legs back." "In that case, come back with me to the palace." "Take me tomorrow; I've got work today," she said.

Again she went into meditation and again the muni felt it. When he came, she said, "I called you the first time because I had no legs. I've got my legs and my husband has accepted me back as his wife. Please bless me." He blessed her, and left with her maid.

The next day, her husband came and took her back and they all lived happily. That's when they gave me this sari!

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

8. FAMILY OF THE DEAF

There was a father and a mother, and their daughter. All three of them were deaf, even the daughter, who had now reached a marriageable age. The father of this deaf family ploughed his fields with a cow; one day a passer-by saw this and said, "What are you doing ploughing with a cow? I've got several bullocks idle in my place. Why don't you take a pair and plough with them?" But the man was deaf, so what he heard was: "Why don't you plough my field, too?" "Your field!" he said. "Let my wife come and we'll see about that."

Soon his wife came with his midday meal and he told her what the man said. "Did you ever hear of such a thing!" he cried. "Some guy ordered me to plough his field! Such insolence!" But his wife was also deaf, remember, so she didn't hear exactly what he said. What she heard was: "Why did you and that daughter of yours eat all the beans? Why didn't you bring me any for lunch?"

The words of the passer-by about helping the man with his ploughing had now become an argument about who ate the beans! In reply, his wife said, "Get lost! Come home and ask her if we ate it; then you'll see who's right!" So the husband and wife went home and stood in front of their daughter.

The mother spoke first: "Your father's saying that we ate all the food and gave him nothing. What do you say to that?" And the daughter answered, "If you two have decided it's really best for me to get married, then, alright, I won't object any longer."

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

9. A THOUSAND FLIES IN A SINGLE BLOW

There was a married couple and they were childless. Finally, after many years, they had a child, a son. Because he was their only son, he was everything to them and they spoiled him terribly; his mother cooked for him and his father worked to earn money. They did absolutely everything for him and as a result he became incredibly lazy. He just slept and ate, and never left the house. He was a complete simpleton who knew nothing of the outside world. Soon, however, it was time to get him married, so they found him a bride from a nearby village and conducted the marriage.

When the new bride went to the river to bathe, all the women told her, "Your husband's the laziest man in the village. He's a good sleeper, but he doesn't know anything else. Who's going to earn money for your family when your in-laws die?" They told her the whole family history and she started to worry: "Why did my parents marry me to this man?"

Every new bride feels this way, doesn't she? But this one was very upset. She decided she would have to do something; so she killed a snake and cooked it - you see she now began to detest her husband because he was so lazy. Then she put the dead snake and some rice in a little pot and gave it to him, saying, "Take this and go out and find some work; we can't always depend on your parents. We've got to take care of ourselves. Go to the next kingdom and ask the raja there for some work. On the way you can eat this food."

Now, he was a complete idler, so on the way he fell asleep, with the food beside him. As he snoozed, flies swarmed over the food and the poison killed them all! When he awoke, he saw a thousand flies lying dead on the food. By that time a crowd had gathered and asked him what had happened. "I killed a thousand flies in a single blow!" he answered calmly "Really! Come with us. Our king has been searching for the right leader for our army for a long time." They took him to the king, who looked at him and said, "So you're the one who killed a thousand flies with one stroke." "Yes, sir, I did that," he said. "Then, I appoint you commander of my army."

He spent his days inside the palace, but at night a fierce tiger prowled the forest eating animals and even humans when it came upon them. "If you killed a thousand flies, you'll be able to handle a single tiger. Kill that animal and bring it back!" ordered the raja. "I will, if you give me a knife with a handle long enough for a man to sit on." The raja agreed and had a sickle made just like that, with the special handle. The man put the sickle high up in a tree and then sat on the handle, holding its cord and waited.

The tiger came and smelled a man up the tree, so it circled round and round. Mm. Watching the tiger, the man tightened his grip on the cord and when the tiger was in the right spot, he moved forward on the handle, bringing the blade down and cutting off the tiger's head! Carrying the tiger's head and his sickle, he returned to the palace, where the raja was ecstatic. This man had done what no one else had been able to do!

Then the raja received a palm-leaf from the neighbouring raja: it was a declaration of war! The message announced that tomorrow the armies should meet at such and such a place. The raja thought, "Why should we go out and fight when we've got this brave warrior here?" So he called his hero and told him to go fight, to which the young man replied, "Yes, I will, raja. But I don't know how to ride a horse, so you must have someone draw a picture of me riding a horse. Then I'll go to war." The raja

ordered someone to draw a picture of him on a horse; and with that picture, he set out for battle the next day.

An enormous army stood before him - thousands and thousands of soldiers, with spears and pikes and bows! The poor simpleton was scared to death. He turned and saw a coconut tree, which he threw his arms around in fear, while still holding the cut-out picture of him on a horse. Scared stiff, he squeezed so hard that the tree was uprooted! When the opposing army saw him in the picture sitting on his horse and holding an uprooted tree, they were filled with fear. "My god! He's coming at us with a tree. What a warrior!" they screamed and ran for their lives!

The man was so scared himself that he returned to the palace still clutching the tree! But the enemies had been routed so the raja gave him a title and held a celebration for him, put him in a chariot and had it pulled through the streets of the town. After all, he had accomplished big things!

When his wife saw this chariot being dragged through the streets, she thought it was a funeral - she was a stupid villager, you see. Thinking her husband had died, she went in front of the chariot and began to perform her lamentations at his unfortunate demise. As she was crying in the street, someone asked her why and she said, "My husband died because I gave him a snake to eat! And now he's being taken to the cremation ground." "Are you crazy! Haven't you heard? Your husband's become a great man, second only to the raja." "Oh, yes," she said quickly. "Yes, of course, he's a great man."

But the raja wouldn't accept her as his hero's wife because he was too great; so he turned her out and she went her own way. Then the raja found a proper princess for his hero and they were married.

Storyteller: Kalaicelvi

10. A PARROT'S STORY

A brother and his little sister lived together. One day, when they went out to graze the goats, she and the other children started to play. She climbed a big tree, all by herself, and started to pick its dark fruit. A pey came and all the children ran away, but she was stuck high up in the tree by herself. The pey came to her and asked her to throw him some fruits with her hands. She threw down some fruits, but he couldn't reach her because she was so high. Then the pey asked her to shake down fruits with her legs; again she did, but still he couldn't catch hold of her. Finally, he asked her to throw him fruits with her long hair. She had long, long hair and when she used it to throw him fruits, the pey grabbed hold of it, pulled her from the tree and took her home.

Seven parrots saw this, and when the pey was away, they rescued the girl and took her to their house, a large parrot-house. Then the parrots flew away, saying, "Don't ever open the door! If you do, the pey will catch you. But if you stand on the roof, you can see a well; if you see a lamp burning in that well, then and only then open the door, because that means we're coming back."

The parrots left, three days passed and soon the girl had nothing left to eat. Hungry, she decided to open the door and see where she might find some food. So she opened the door and saw a house nearby. "I'll go there and borrow something to cook," she thought. It was the pey's house, but she didn't know that. She knocked and he opened the door, but she ran back into the other house and shut the door. Chasing after her, the pey said, "I'll get you later," and then fastened his claws on her door - one claw up high and one claw down below.

The next day when she went to the roof and looked at the well, she saw the light and realised the parrots were returning. So she opened the door, but the claws fell on her and killed her! The parrots cried for her, then made a box and put her in it. They put the box into the ocean, where a raja and his minister found it.

"I want the box," said the minister. "Good; I'll take what's inside," said the raja. Opening it, they saw the dead girl. Then they saw the two claws, which they removed and she came back to life.

The raja took her home and wanted to marry her, but there were already three other women in the palace. So he said to the four of them, "I'll marry whoever is the best cook. Each day I'll come and eat in a different house." He gave them each a measure of unhusked rice and told them to pound it, without bruising a single grain, and then to cook it.

"How can I do that?" wondered the girl. As she cried, the parrots flew overhead and saw her. "Look, she's alive, the girl we rescued," they said. She explained what had to be done and the parrots carefully pecked open the husks. She cooked it nicely, while the other wives pounded too hard and ruined the rice kernels inside. So the raja married her.

Storyteller: Alli

11. FOUR THIEVES

A father had four sons: "quarter-thief", "half-thief", "three-quarters-thief" and "total thief". One day he said to them, "Go out and steal in broad daylight."

First to go to work was the youngest son, "quarter-thief". He went to one of those hairdressers who cut your hair and things like that. He had his hair cut nicely but didn't have a paisa on him, so he said to the barber, "I don't have any change, but if send your daughter with me for a moment, I'll get some notes changed in a shop and send her back with the money."

The thief took her and went to a clothes shop, where he picked out clothes for a large family and then said to the owner, "I'll show these to my family - they're just outside there - and let them pick out what they like; then I'll bring it all back and pay for what they've chosen. Meanwhile I'll leave my daughter here with you, for security." He left her behind and ran straight away to his house. He didn't give the barber a paisa and he didn't give the shopkeeper a paisa. Highway robbery, in broad daylight!

The next day the barber went looking for his daughter and found her in the clothes shop. "Hey! What are you doing with my daughter!" screamed the barber. "Oh! I gave three thousand rupees worth of clothes to some guy who said she was his daughter! He let me keep her here until he returned, after showing the stuff to his family."

After this, the barber, the shopkeeper and the girl went to see the raja. Telling his story, the barber concluded, "Ask anyone; they'll say she's my daughter." And everyone said she was. Then the raja said, "Some thief tricked you about your daughter and then took her and fooled the other man. Can't have this sort of thing in my kingdom. Tomorrow we'll place guards at all the clothes shop!"

On the next day, the second son, "half-thief", tried his hand. When he discovered that a watchman's son-in-law had gone to Singapore, he bought some goods and came to the watchman's house, dressed as if he'd just returned from abroad - he looked just like their son-in-law. That fellow had married their daughter and left so quickly that the family didn't know him well.

Anyway, here was this man come back laden with gifts. He talked with them a while, they all ate and then got ready for bed. The father had to go on duty - it was night, you see - so he said to the others, "You all get some sleep; I've got to go on my rounds because there are thieves about." But when he started to leave, the fake son-in-law said, "Uncle, I'll come with you to see the town,"

The two of them, set out and came to the stocks, in which criminals are put - it really squeezes them and kills them, one of those cruel tortures from the old days. "What's this, uncle?" asked the thief. "It's the stocks, for criminals." "Oh, I'll try it out," said the thief, but the father said, "No, No! You might get hurt; I'll get in and show you how it works." Realising this was his chance, he locked the watchman in there very tightly.

The old man said, "Son, this is a little too tight! Get the key from the house and let me out." The thief did go back to his house but didn't ask for the key; instead, he said, "There are thieves about, so uncle told me to get all your things in a box and take it to him for safekeeping. Quickly." They gathered up all their gold and clothes and gave it to him, and he took it straight home. And the man was stuck in the stocks!

In the morning, the raja was making his rounds and saw the head watchman locked in the stocks. When he learned that the thief, disguised as the son-in-law, had tricked the watchman and run off, he said to himself, "There's mischief everywhere in the kingdom!" To his minister he said, "Right! Tonight you will stand guard!"

That night it was the turn of "three-quarters thief" to do some business. It turned out that the minister had a lover, and he used to go to her house every night at about ten o'clock. The thief disguised himself as the minister and went to her house ahead of him, at eight o'clock. "What's this? Why so early tonight?" said the dasi. "Oh, the city is full of thieves, so I came early to protect you! Give me your jewels and I'll store them in the palace, where they'll be safe. If you keep them here, somebody might come in disguise and take them from you. I'll prevent that by storing them in the palace. I'll come back, but don't open the door for anyone else."

Saying this, he left with her jewels and went home. Later, as usual, the real minister came to her house at ten. He knocked on her door but she wouldn't open it. "Who the hell are you! Knocking on my door!" "You fool! Someone's robbed you blind! And now you won't let me in!" "Well, if you really are the minister, tell me some secret that I've told you before. Then I'll open the door." When the minister told her a secret and she opened the door, she understood: "He's the real minister, and the one who came before was a fake - and he's run off with my jewels!"

When he heard that his minister had been tricked and his lover's house looted, the raja decided that he must stand guard himself! That night it was time for the "total thief" to try his luck. This is what he did - he got some bidis and cigarettes and a hurricane lantern, and set up a stall at a crossroads. Circling the town, the raja came to that spot and, seeing a man squatting there, asked him, "What are you doing here with this lantern and shop?" "Well, to tell the truth, sir, this is where the thieves come with their stolen cash to buy things. So I always set up shop right here." "In that case, can you catch the thieves for me?" asked the raja. "Sure, I'll catch them for you. But you'll have to take off your jewels and fine clothes, otherwise they'll recognise you. I'll hide you in a sack; when they come, I'll let you out and you can grab them."

The raja gave the man his jewels, rings, fine clothes, everything - he was stripped naked - and had himself tied up in the sack. Then the thief gathered up all the money and clothes and yelled, "Help! Help! Thieves!" and ran off with the goods. Immediately a crowd gathered and began to beat the body in the sack, until the raja screamed, "You fools! A thief ran off with my things!" They opened the sack and saw the raja, who said, "My god! He's tricked me, too!" The raja and his people were really upset! I was there, too. And that's when I got this sari.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

12. THE BLINDED HEROINE

A raja ruled over his kingdom for many, many years, but he had no child. He was very sad, but eventually he gained a boon and with that boon a child was born. It was a girl. When she was born, the royal elephant cried "Amma!" and then it turned to stone. If that happens to an elephant, it's an evil omen, sir, for the raja, that is. Not knowing why this happened, the raja was distressed.

Soon the girl grew up and became a young woman. She climbed to the top of the palace and stood there. Again that elephant saw her, cried out "Amma" and turned into a stone statue - it fell down and died, in fact. Seeing this the raja thought, "I've lost my palace elephant! I can't keep her any longer. I've got to get rid of her and somehow get another daughter; there's no other way" He ordered his guards to take her away and kill her.

They left her in the forest, and brought back the blood of a jackal or something to show the raja. The poor girl who had lived in a palace suddenly woke up all alone in the forest; she was confused and didn't know why her father had done this. Looking around, she saw a light, far in the distance, about ten or fifteen kilometres away. "I'll go there," she thought. "And maybe I'll survive."

The path was rough, covered with thorns and sharp stones, but she kept walking. Eventually she came to a huge palace, where a girl kept her little brother locked up and guarded by seven guards; she kept him in the forest so that he would never see a woman and would marry her own daughter. When the princess arrived, everyone was asleep, even the guards; only the little brother was awake. Following the light burning in his room, she entered the palace and went into his room.

He was startled and called, "Who are you! How did you trick all the guards and enter here?" "I didn't do anything to anyone," she said. "Then who are you, daring to come in here like this?" She told her story, how her father had tried to kill her, how the guards had spared her, and how she had seen his light. He believed her and kept her in his room, disguised as a man. She stayed with him, but the problem was that he was only given food enough for one person which they had to share. After a few days it wasn't enough, so he said to his sister, "A friend has come; we need another plate of food." The sister got suspicious and angry: "What's he want another plate of food for? Who's this friend?"

She devised a little plan to find out what was going on. You see, the brother always gave everything to the princess first, whether it was food or clothes or whatever - he gave it to her first. So when his sister gave him a pair of magic sandals, naturally he gave them to the princess to try on. The magic was that as soon as you tried them on, you were transported to the sister's room; that's how she had them made. Not knowing anything about his sister's plan, the boy said to the princess, "Sister has made me these new sandals, but I want you to put them on first."

When the princess put them on, she landed at the sister's feet. The sister yelled, "You good for nothing! Ruining my little brother's life which I have so carefully planned for him." She plucked out both her eyes, had her shaved and thrown down a dry well. She was alive, but that was all.

The sister put the princess' eyes in a bowl. She plucked out her eyes so that she would be blind - that's an important point, sir. Inside the well, the blind girl cried and cried for help. No one paid any attention to her, until a wandering sadhu passed by

and heard her cry; he twisted his veshti into a rope and pulled her out of the well. Then he took her home to care for her and fed her from his daily collection of alms.

Because she was blind, however, rats came and ate off her plate. She couldn't see them, you see! Those rats took little morsels to the rat raja, who said, "This is really nice stuff! Where'd you get it?" "There's this girl who doesn't shoo us away when she eats; it's from her plate." "I see; she obviously has some problem. Tonight while she's sleeping, I want you to go and find out what that problem is."

That night all the rats went together, and one by one they searched her hands, arms, legs, until finally a lame rat found that she had no eyes. "She's got everything, except eyes," the lame rat reported. "All right," said the raja rat. "Those eyes have to be somewhere near here. They can't have vanished. Someone's done her wrong. Find those eyes and bring them here!" Each rat went to a separate house to search; the lame one went to the sister's house, where it saw the eyes resting in the bowl. Lifting them out, it took them to the raja. "Tonight, while she's asleep, put her eyes back," said the raja. So, holding the eyes in its tail, the lame rat took them and placed them in her sockets.

When she awoke, with her sight restored, she fell at the sadhu's feet and said, "Swami, you have cared for me all this time! Now I can see again. Get me a cow. I'll milk it and sell the milk and buttermilk, and feed us." He bought her the cow and she began to sell milk in the streets, going house to house, and eventually to the sister's house - who thought the princess was long dead! But the princess recognised her and saw that she had a daughter; so she decided to get her revenge.

She went to their house often, selling milk and buttermilk, and soon had made friends with the daughter, who was about to marry the brother, her uncle. By now the princess' hair had grown very long, and she wore it in a beautiful braid. When the daughter saw her, she said, "Your hair is beautiful. How do you grow it so long?" "Oh, that. I'll tell you tomorrow," said the princess in order to think about what to tell her.

By that time the daughter's marriage to the brother was three days away, so when the princess returned the next day, the daughter asked her to tell her the secret quickly. "I want to have hair like yours, for my wedding," she explained with envy. "Your wedding's tomorrow? I see. First shave off all your hair, then prick your scalp with a needle, and rub chillies on your scalp. Tie a cloth on your head and sit quietly in a corner all night. In the morning, take off the cloth and your hair will be just like mine."

Saying this, she went away - where do you think she went? To the brother, but she didn't tell him what she'd done. Meanwhile the daughter ran to her mother and said, "The milkmaid told me how to get hair like hers, mother! Do it for me, please!" Her head was shaved completely bald, holes were poked in her scalp with a nail and chillies rubbed in - do you know how painful that must have been! They tied a cloth on her head and left her; soon her head was crawling with worms!

The sun rose the next morning, the day of the wedding. The brother told the princess to come to the wedding, disguised like a friend of the family, keeping her face covered with her sari. "Let's see how the wedding comes off; if there's an opportunity afterward, I'll marry you, too." You see, he honestly believed his sister's daughter was going to be a good bride for him; he didn't know anything about how she had mistreated the princess or how the princess had tricked her.

Proudly they led the bride to the marriage hall, but her head was swarming with worms. They hid it somehow and brought her in and sat her down next to the brother. The brother couldn't stand it, the smell was so bad. "Sister!" he yelled. "What kind of a girl have you raised! She's bald, for god's sake! Take her out of here!" Then he gave the bridal sari to the princess and told her to put it on. She did and they were married.

When they went back to his house, the princess said, "We can't stay here because your sister will cause us trouble; let's go to my father's house." So they went to her father's house, where the raja had reached old age and it was time to crown a new raja. When she arrived, she went straight up to him and said, "Father, I'm your daughter, the one you told the guards to kill. But they spared me and I survived in another land where I was protected by a sadhu. And now I have returned home." "I'm very happy, and I'll make your husband the new raja," said her father.

They conducted the coronation, and I saw it all and came back to tell the story.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

13. A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW'S REVENGE

A husband and wife had one son, who was married to a girl from another town. The girl's parents had given her a proper marriage with jewels, so she wasn't a burden. It turned out that her father-in-law was all right, but her mother-in-law didn't like the new bride at all. Every day, after her husband went to work, the girl knew nothing but hardship: she had to clean, wash, cook, everything! And she wasn't given any food. She suffered terribly, but she bore it all patiently and said nothing to her husband.

Even this wasn't enough for the mother-in-law, however, who planned a little something extra. One day after her husband and son had left the house, she put the poor girl in a sack, lifted her onto a bullock cart and took her to the cremation ground. She put the sack on a stack of wood and was about to light the pyre, when she realised that she had no matches, so she went back to get them.

Near the cremation ground, four watchmen who were supposed to guard goats were lying down half-asleep. Inside the sack, the girl realised her mother-in-law had gone and tried to get out. The watchmen thought they heard a strange sound, like a voice crying: "Help me! Someone help, me!" They searched around until they found the sack on the ground, opened it and saw the girl, which frightened them to death - since it was the cremation ground! But she reassured them.

Then the girl filled the sack with charcoal - there's a lot around in cremation grounds, isn't there? - and left with the watchmen. When the mother-in-law returned with the matches, she poured groundnut all over the sack, lit it and said, "That's all for you, honey! I'll marry my son to a rich bride now!" and went back home where she told her husband and son that the girl had simply run back to her parents' house. The son accepted tins and went to sleep.

Meanwhile the watchmen asked the girl what had happened and she said, "My parents married me off well, but my mother-in-law stopped me from speaking or sleeping with my husband and then did this to me!" "Well, it's morning now; you can go safely," they said. She left them and walked some distance in the early hours of the morning.

She came to a Ganesa temple and rested inside; soon four thieves arrived, as they often did, after looting the countryside. Seeing them with their cash, gold and other booty, she hid behind the statue of Ganesa. They emptied their sacks and said, "Lord Ganesa! Here's your usual one-third," and gave necklaces, cash and jewels as an offering to the god.

After they left with the rest of the loot, the girl came out of hiding, dressed herself with this hoard of jewelry and walked back to her mother-in-law's house. Hearing a knock on the door, the old woman opened it and was stunned: "Who are you?" "It's me," said the daughter-in-law. "But how? I tried to burn you! What happened?" "Oh," said the girl, "you burned me all right, but I went straight to heaven and met my parents. Know what they said? "You're too young to have died; you've got years to go yet. Here, take these jewels and go back to earth and enjoy life." Then I came back here." "Really! You must burn me, too, so I can visit my parents and get jewels from them!"

The daughter-in-law consented to her request and, without telling her husband, tied the old woman in a sack, took her to the cremation ground and lit the fire. The old woman died, and the daughter-in-law came back home, where she told her husband the whole story. And they lived happily after that.

Storyteller: Kalaicelvi

14. THE THREE DIAMONDS

There was a husband and wife, and their only son. He got up to every kind of mischief. His parents died, and the boy was brought up by his grandmother; still he wandered around like a no-good - he drank, he gambled, he did every bad thing possible. "Now listen, son," said his grandmother. "I'm going to die soon; if you would just stop one of your bad habits, just one of them, my soul would find peace."

The son began to think: "What can I give up? Can't stop going to the dasi's house. Can't give up drink or cards. But what about lying? I could try living without that for a while, and I could still do everything else." So he said to his grandmother, "I will never lie again."

One day he went to steal at the raja's palace - he had been wandering around the town and had found nothing to pinch so he tried the palace. On his way, he met the raja in disguise, who asked him where he was going. "I'm going to steal at the palace" - he couldn't he, remember. "Good. I'll come with you," said the raja, who then asked who he was and where he lived, and the boy told him since he had to tell the truth!

"Listen," said the raja, "inside the palace is a box of diamonds; steal it and we'll run off with it." Now the raja had only said there were "diamonds" but when he opened it, he found it contained three. He left one in box for the palace, and took the other two - one for himself and one for his companion outside. Returning to the raja, he said, "Here, you take one; I'll keep the other." Of course, he still didn't know that this was the raja. "This is how I have to make ends meet," he said and left.

The raja thought about all this and in the morning called his minister: "There's been a theft in the palace. Go investigate." "Where would a thief steal in the palace?" wondered the minister. "Oh, right! The box of diamonds!" When the minister opened the box, he saw that two had been stolen and that one remained. "Well," he said to himself, "if I take this last one, no one will notice anything." So he pocketed that diamond and then reported to the raja that all three diamonds were missing. Of course, the raja still had one of the diamonds, didn't he? And the thief still had his; he hadn't sold it yet.

The raja gave the boy's name and address and had him summoned to the palace. Then the raja summoned the whole town to an assembly in order to reveal the truth. When questioned in the assembly, the minister said, "I didn't take anything! Nothing!" When the thief was asked where he was yesterday, he answered, "I came to the palace" - he had to tell the truth. "What did you do?" "I stole." "What did you steal?" "Diamonds. The man with me said there were diamonds in the palace. There were three; I left one in the box for the raja, and took the other two: one for me and one for my accomplice."

Hearing this, the raja said, "I am the person who was with you yesterday. Look, here is the diamond you gave me!" "And here is the diamond that I kept," said the thief and handed it over. When they searched the minister they found the missing diamond.

The raja said, "You liar! The thief openly admitted that he had stolen, but you tried to deceive me! He spoke the whole truth and even gave back a diamond, but you hid it!" So the raja ordered the minister to be beaten and hanged, and then appointed the thief in his place. "As long as you know the value of not lying, you will serve as my minister and I will trust you. That minister was a liar, who tried to hide the truth from me."

And from that day the boy served as the raja's minister.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

15. THE KIND AND THE UNKIND GIRLS

A man and his wife had seven children and they had to feed all seven of them every day. One day, as the mother left the house she said to them, "There're some cakes in that pot; take one each for yourselves and give one to baba" - the littlest one. When she heard this, the next youngest one, a girl about six or seven years, got an idea: she decided to eat both her cake and the one for her little sister. When the cakes were distributed and this girl ate two of them, the littlest one, the seventh one, began to cry. But the others screamed at her, "You little Ear! You ate it; you're just saying she did! Get out of this house." So they drove that little one away. The sixth child ate the extra cake, but the seventh got blamed. She was completely innocent but she had to leave.

Driven away from her family, the little girl walked and walked, a long way, crying all the time. She passed a rose bush, which said, "Little girl, please water me. I'm dying of thirst. If you give me water, when you come back I'll give you roses." So she watered the bush, and went farther, where she saw a pair of grinding stones which were separated. The stones said, "We're dying of thirst in this hot sun; please put us back together. If you do, I'll give you a grinding stone when you return." So the little girl picked up the top stone and placed it on the bottom stone.

She went farther and saw a cow and its calf. The cow cried out, "Amma! They've tied us up in this fierce sun, without any water! Give us some water, and I'll give you a calf when you return." So she watered the cow, which then fed its calf. Again, she walked ahead and saw a horse and a colt standing apart. "If you unite us, I'll give you a colt when you return." So she put the mother and child together, and went on ahead. When she reached the sea, it said, "Amma, if you cross my waters carefully, without disturbing me, I'll give you a bushel of pearls when you return." So she stepped into the sea, gently parted the waters with her hands and crossed to the other side.

She met an old woman, who invited her to her house. The girl told the woman to go bathe while she prepared the meal. When the old woman bathed and returned, the girl had made the dung cakes, cleaned up and cooked the food. She lived in that house, doing chores for the old woman for a long time. She did whatever she was told, and when she grew up to be a young woman, the old woman got her married. The girl protested, "Granny! Who will take care of you?" But she said, "Oh, don't worry about me. You should get married; that's all."

So she did and the granny sent her back to her house. On the way she came to the sea, and there was a bushel of pearls. "Don't forget the pearls," said the sea. She took them and then came to the horse, who gave her a colt, and then to the cow who gave her a calf. The stone gave her a grinding stone, and the rose bush gave her roses. Bringing all this to her house in a lorry, she gave it to her family.

They were ecstatic: "Look at that! We drove her away for eating an extra cake, but look at these things she's brought home! And she's married, too."

Now they decided to drive out the other child, the next youngest girl who had eaten the extra cake. She left but was disobedient and didn't hear what the rose bush said, what the horse said or what the grinding stones asked. She heard nothing. When she got to the ocean and it asked her to cross carefully, she just splashed through, hurting it.

The first girl had been quiet and soft, and got everything, but this one was rough and untamed. When she got to the old woman's house, she didn't do what she was told. She grew up and got married, to a lame man. Then she was sent home - but, who's going to give her anything? What do you think, sir? When she got home, her mother said, "Don't come in here!" The girl was sad and thought to herself, "Oh, this is what I get for not listening to anyone!"

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

16. THE SINGING BONE

A man and his wife had seven sons and one daughter, and when they married the daughter to a good family, they were all very happy. Soon she was pregnant and came back to stay at her parents' house for a while. After staying there for about a month, her parents sent her back with one of her younger brothers, saying, "Take her back to her husband." They dressed her with many jewels and gave her a nice send off; the brother led his sister and her child back to her husband's house, but on the way he stole all her jewels. He killed her and buried her and her child near each other in the forest. When he came back, he said, "I left her with brother-in-law."

After three months passed, her husband began to wonder why she hadn't returned, so he set out to visit her parents' house. On the way, he passed the place where she had been buried, where a rose bush now stood in full flower. Thinking he would take roses to his wife, he started to pluck the flowers, but his dead wife sang to him:

Don't pluck me, my husband,
Don't touch us!
My child and I were cut down.

"There's something wrong here; the flowers won't be any good," thought the man, who then went to pluck flowers from the other rose bush. But there he heard:

Don't pluck me, father,
Don't touch us!
Mother and I were cut down.

When they spoke like this, to prevent him from plucking their flowers, he understood what had happened: "My wife was killed on her way back to me." He went straight to his in-law's house and asked, as if he still knew nothing, "Where is she? It's been a long time, and I'm not eating well." "What? Her brother took her home weeks ago." "Please come with me, all of you. There's something important you should hear," pleaded the husband.

When they got to the rose bushes and went to pluck flowers, the bushes sang to them, addressing each of them in turn by their kin relation:

Don't pluck me, grandfather,
Don't touch us!
My mother and I were cut down.

Don't pluck me, grandmother,
Don't touch us!
My mother and I were cut down.

Again and again, the two bushes spoke like this, one after the other. They sang like this to each member of the family who went to pick flowers, until the last one, the murderer himself, approached. The big bush spoke first:

Don't pluck me, murderer,
Don't touch me!
My child and I were cut down.

And then the little bush said:

Don't pluck me, murderer.
Don't touch us,
My mother and I were cut down.

When they heard this, everyone knew the truth. "You cold-blooded murderer!" screamed his parents. "You killed one of our children; now you can die!" and they beat him up, drove him away, and he died.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

17. THE FISH-BROTHER

There were seven brothers and one sister; the youngest brother was a fish in the river.

Kalaichelvi: You've got to say that the seventh brother was lame and the sister takes food to him.

Storyteller: No, be quiet.

Kalaichelvi: But she takes him food.

Storyteller: No, all the brothers are fine.

Kalaichelvi: But...

Storyteller: Keep quiet and let me tell the story.

The sister used to take food to her brothers every day, and on the way she would give the youngest, the fish, a ball of rice. One day she didn't have enough rice to feed the fish-brother, so she made a ball of dirt, stuck the few remaining rice grains on top and fed him that. When the fish saw the dirt-ball, it thought, "So this is what my sister brings me! And I carry her across the river every day!" Enraged, he cut off her nose with his sharp fin.

The sister lived at home, and did her usual chores. Soon it was time for her marriage and everyone contributed money toward the preparations. But there were no flowers anywhere in that town! Nowhere! They looked everywhere, but found nothing. In the end, they went to the place where they had buried the fish-brother - you see, they had got angry with him for hurting their sister and said, "We've only got one sister and she's got to get married; but you disfigured her like this! How's she going to get married!"

They had got angry and killed him. Then he became a rose bush and that's where they went to get flowers. Begging and pleading, the parents were able to pluck flowers from the bush. They took the flowers home and wove them into a marriage garland. It's said that a garland put on a good person will shine brightly and that a garland on a bad person will turn black. That's what happened here. They put a garland on the groom and it was beautiful, but when they garlanded the bride, the flowers turned black, again and again. At this point, her parents said to her, "Go to your brother and ask for forgiveness; then come back."

She went to the spot where her brother was buried and said contritely, "What I did was wrong. I didn't bring enough food that day; that's why I gave you that dirt-rice. Please forgive me and send me back with your blessings." When he heard this, the fish-brother blessed her and wished her a happy married life.

This time when the garland was put on her neck, it shone brightly. They were married and all were happy.

Storyteller: Vijayalakshmi

18. THE STORY OF A LITTLE FINGER

A husband and wife lived in a village but they didn't have any children. The wife wanted to make money - you know how women like money - so she practiced what we call country or local medicine. What you do is take a skull and mix things in it - that's the sort of thing she did. At night - you know how the bodies are left to burn at the burning ground - well, at night this woman would go there and pick up things, like fingers and skulls and so on. Then she'd crush it all and sell it as country medicine. This is what she did every night in the cremation ground, although her husband knew nothing about it.

One night while she was in the cremation ground bending over her skulls and fingers, a gravedigger saw her and said to his friend, "Look! A corpse has risen up! It's squatting over there!" He went back to get his shovel and axe, but by the time he returned, she had hidden herself next to a corpse. "My god! Someone's brought another corpse! There was one when we went and now there's two of them!" said the gravedigger and again went to find his friend. When he returned, she had got up and was sitting there. "Look! It's risen up again!"

Again he went back to get his companion, but when he returned, she had laid down again on the border of her sari. "Let's see if these corpses are dead or alive," he said and sliced off a thumb from each body. Her hand was bleeding, but she didn't make a sound, nothing at all. The grave-diggers took the thumbs and left; then she got up, gathered up her skull and things, went back home and continued to sell her medicine.

In the morning, the gravediggers went back to see the corpses, but only one was there; the other, the woman, had vanished. "What! We cut off its thumb and it's gone! Someone's playing tricks on us," they said and went through the streets crying, "Thumbless ones! Come and buy a thumb."

Now the husband knew nothing about what his wife was doing, but he knew that she had lost one of her thumbs. When he heard these men in the street, he called them over and bought a thumb. Meanwhile, she hid inside, afraid that these men might harm her. They left, but first they noted the house. "What are you doing buying thumbs in the street from just anyone!" she yelled at him, but then dropped the issue.

On the next day the two gravediggers came back to her house to rob her because they thought she must be pretty rich. What did she do? She shut her husband up inside the house and waited for them to come; she had a feeling they would come back at night. With their tools they began to bore a hole through her wall, but she was waiting for them. As soon as the first guy stuck his head through, she smashed him with a rice-beater and dragged him inside. When the other guy poked his head through, she did the same to him. "Got them both," she thought with satisfaction.

The next night she put her bed outside in the open air and slept fearlessly. She didn't know there were four or five of them in the gang; two were dead, but that meant there were still three left.

Next day those three began to think, "Those first two went to her house and never came back. Better see what she's done to them." When they came and saw her asleep, they thought, "That's her all right." So they lifted the bed, with her still asleep in it and carried it away.

On the way, she awoke and realised that more men had come and were taking her away. Then she thought of a plan: wherever she could reach, she tore off branches from the mango trees passing above her and laid them on the bed. When the branches with the ripe fruit weighed about as much as a human body, she grabbed hold of a big branch and, hanging on to it, let the bed go ahead without her. The men carrying it didn't notice the difference, since the branches on the bed weighed as much as she did.

Soon more mangoes fell on the bed and they thought, "It's getting heavier! Must be a heavy sleeper." Putting the bed down near a mandapam, they discovered that she wasn't there and got furious: "She's tricked us again!" They sat down, defeated, and then, looking around, they saw some goats grazing and a goatherd fast asleep. The three of them grabbed the goat, killed it, skinned it and cooked it underneath a tree.

It was the same tree that she had escaped into from the bed. One of the men climbed up as a look-out while the others below were eating. "Go on up there, and we'll call you when we're finished so you can eat. Yell if you see anyone." When he climbed up and saw the woman there, he started to scream, but she stopped him: "Keep quiet and I'll make you rich."

So he kept silent and let the others eat below. After a while, she said, "Why not go down and get some food so we can eat something." The man went down, said he wanted some food, got it and climbed back up. As he climbed back, they reminded him: "Let us know if you see anyone; otherwise we'll stay right here."

When he came back with the food, she said, "Feed me and then I'll feed you." As soon as he put food in her mouth, she bit hard on his fingers and he screamed with pain. "Someone's coming!" they said below and ran off, leaving all their money and the rest of the food. She climbed down - the other guy couldn't do anything with his fingers bitten off - ate the whole meal, scooped up the money and went home.

Among the booty she brought back home were the five fingers she had bitten off in the tree. She was satisfied, but her husband just wouldn't leave well enough alone and took the fingers to sell in the market. He went around calling, "Fingers for sale! Fingers for the fingerless!" That day the woman whose husband had been bitten in the tree came to the market. Hearing the offer, she bought the fingers and gave them to her husband - they fit his hand perfectly!

With his fingers restored, he thought again of how this woman had cheated them all! Gathering the others together, they sat down to plan their revenge, saying "She's deceived us again and again; and she's rich, too!" But they couldn't think of a plan, so they went to the raja and reported her: "There's a woman in your realm who is a raksasi; she deals in corpses in the cremation ground, and she's gotten rich from it." "If she's doing that, I'll have her arrested," said the raja and sent out his minister.

The woman was brought back and held in prison. Now, at this time the queen had a terrible cough which just wouldn't go away. No matter how many doctors they called and no matter how many medicines they tried, the cough wouldn't stop. When she heard this, the imprisoned woman said, "Raja, my medicine will cure her." But the raja didn't trust her because of what had been said about her. Slowly, however, the illness got worse and the queen was on her death bed. In the end, with no other recourse, the raja told the woman to prepare her medicines. Mixing the fingers and other stuff in a skull, she gave it to the queen, who recovered immediately!

As a result, the raja put the thieves in jail and sentenced them to death. To the woman and her husband, the raja gave gold and they prospered as the raja's favourites in the palace.

Storyteller: Kalaichelvi

19. CINDERELLA

There was a couple who had only one daughter. When, after a while, the wife died, the man married again and his second wife also gave birth to a girl. So there were two half-sisters, each about the same age, although the first was a little older. The first wife, who had died, was not cremated; instead the man kept a samadhi, a memorial, to her in a corner of the house. Later, though, he buried her in the backyard.

The second wife did whatever was in her power to cause trouble for her step-daughter, the older sister. The girl was able to bear it all silently because, although she had no relatives, her father was on her side. She did all the housework cheerfully - made dung cakes, grazed the animals, collected firewood, all that sort of work, while the other girl, the younger one, was sent to school dressed in nice clothes.

Both sisters reached puberty about the same time, but although the younger one wore the very best, new clothes, the older one was given hand-me-downs.

The local raja had a son, a prince, who was about to be married, but he wasn't set on marrying a princess. He wanted all the girls in the whole kingdom to be summoned to the palace, where he would pick out the one he liked. The raja arranged for this event and everyone came, the rich and poor, from everywhere. Of course, they all dressed up as nicely as possible, in their best jewels and clothes. The mother of the younger girl dressed her in a new sari, expensive jewelry and pottu, and sent her to the event in a carriage. But to the older girl, she said, "You can't leave; stay home!"

The older girl went to the backyard where her mother was buried and began to cry. "Mother! You're dead and I should have died with you! It's not that I want to marry the prince, but I do want to see it all! You're gone and can't do anything for me now."

Bending her head to the grave, she cried, and then she heard a voice. Just a voice, she didn't see anyone. "Don't worry, dear. Everything you need awaits you inside the house. Go and see." When she went inside she found a full set of new clothes, everything from head to toe, and it was all so beautiful! She dressed quickly and went outside, where a carriage was waiting for her and off she rode.

Inside the assembly hall, she sat in a chair with the other girls. The prince looked at each girl, and didn't like a single one. Now the older girl's mother had also told her that she had a time limit and that if she went past the deadline, she would lose all her new clothes and find herself in old rags again. So she kept watching the time, and just when the prince saw her and decided she was the one, her time was up! Rising suddenly, she ran outside and, in her rush, she left a slipper behind; climbing into the carriage, she rode home.

Inside the assembly hall, the prince could think of no one but her! He sent all the other girls away and wondered how he could find the one who had fled. Then, looking at her chair, he saw the slipper. "That's her slipper. Find the girl whose foot fits this slipper!" he commanded his men.

They took the slipper and tried it on the feet of every girl in the whole kingdom. At home, the older girl had changed back into her old self, while the younger girl sulked: "She was so beautiful! That girl who came, the one the prince wants to marry!" The younger one pouted while the older one did her housework.

Meanwhile the raja's men went from house to house, trying to find the slipper's owner, and eventually they came to this house. The bad girl tried hard to make the slipper fit her foot; she pushed and tugged, but it just wouldn't fit. Then the older girl said, "Let me try." "You?" mocked the younger girl. "You're quite a beauty all right!"

But the raja's men said, "Let her try. Everyone must try." She took the slipper, and it fitted her foot perfectly! They took her back to the palace where the prince asked her, "How did you change into such a beautiful girl?" "My mother's dead and my stepmother treated me horribly. My dead mother gave me beautiful clothes and sent me to the palace. She said I had to return by a certain time; if I didn't, I'd lose everything. That's why I had to leave."

She told her story, and the truth was that she was a beautiful girl. When he heard this, the prince said he would marry her. All the arrangements were made, everyone was invited, and he married her.

Storyteller: Kalaicelvi

20. ANIMAL HELPERS

A man and his wife had a son, but they didn't have much money. Both the mother and father had to work as daily labourers in order to feed themselves. One day, when the boy had grown up and could earn money, he said to his mother, "I can't make any money here. I'll go away, earn some money and bring it back. Give me a food packet and send me off." Oh, there was also a raja who ruled that land.

The son went off and soon came to a thick forest, which he had to cross in order to get to the next town. He saw an old well covered with vines and snakes. He walked along and spied a snake so tangled up in the vines that it couldn't move. "Anne, help me!" cried the snake. Frightened that the snake would bite him, the boy hesitated and again the snake cried out, "Don't be afraid; I won't hurt you. Just set me free." Reassured, the boy cut the vines, lifted the snake out and, just as it said, it didn't harm him. It just slithered away through the forest and the boy walked on.

Next he came to a deep pit - as deep as a well, one of those pits you can fall into by night or day. A man trapped inside called to him, "Tambi, help me get out. I fell in while walking like you, and I haven't eaten for three whole days!" He had hesitated to help the snake but not to help this man; immediately he cut a vine, dropped it in the pit and drew the man up. "If you ever need any help, come to me," said the man who gave his address and left.

A little further the boy came to a tiger with a thorn deep in its foot. Unable to walk, it sat there holding its foot and cried, "Anne! Help me! Pull this thorn out, please." Again the boy hesitated because he thought the tiger might kill him, but the tiger said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you." The boy then took out a knife and cut out the thorn, and the tiger thanked him and went on its way.

After giving assistance to these three, he went still further, a long distance, until he came to a village. He searched for work but couldn't get what he wanted; he stayed a while and decided to go back home. Disappointed, he returned back through the forest, where the tiger stopped him and offered him a big bag which it held in its mouth. "What's that?" asked the boy. "Not much; just some gold and coins. It's for you." "How did you get this stuff?" "A prince came hunting in the forest. All of us tigers got together and killed the horse and the prince. Then we collected these things that he had. He tried to kill us, but you helped me so they're yours. Take them." Without a thought as to what the raja would say if he found out, the boy accepted the gifts and went on.

But he did realise that he shouldn't carry all this wealth home at night. Remembering that the man whom he had helped lived in a nearby village, he decided to spend the night there and go home in the morning. When he knocked on his door, the man opened it and asked, "What do you want?" "I've got some money, but this area is full of thieves so I thought I'd spend the night somewhere safe and go home in the morning." He lay down with the bag near his head, but as soon as he fell asleep, the man looked into the bag. Seeing the prince's jewels, clothes and rings - remember there was only one prince in the area, so he could easily identify them - he said to himself, "Oh ho! He's stolen the prince's possessions! If I tell the raja about this, he'll give me fine gifts for sure."

Leaving the boy asleep, he ran to the palace and said, "I've caught the thief who killed the prince and stole his things - I've got him in my house. Send your men now." A party of mounted soldiers, with spears and swords, rushed to his house.

Waking the boy, the soldiers shouted, "Get up, thief! You killed the prince and stole his things!" The boy was completely confused, since he thought the tiger had killed the prince, and said, "Who told you all this?" "Him, the man of this house." The boy thought to himself: "Look at that! The animals I helped showed me gratitude, but not this human being!"

He was taken to the raja who was in a rage - I mean, his own son had been killed. So he sentenced the boy to die in the morning: he would be stood up in a pit, so his head showed above ground, and then trampled by an elephant. Thrown in prison to await his death in the morning, the boy began to cry; then the snake came to him and asked why he was crying. "I was given this stuff by a tiger and then I slept in the house of a man I had helped, but he lied to the raja and put me in this situation. What's the point of doing good in this world!" "Don't worry. I'm going to bite the princess with my poison and no one will be able to extract the poison. You must go and hold your hand over her; the poison will immediately leave her body and the raja will reward you."

As soon as it spoke, the snake went to the princess' room and bit her. The raja called all the doctors in the land, but none could save her. The boy in prison said he could help, and with no other recourse, the raja ordered the boy to be brought to him. The boy entered the room and did nothing except extend his hand over the princess, yet suddenly the poison left her body.

"Where did you get these powers?" asked the raja. "And how did you kill my son?" "I don't know how that happened, raja. On my way to earn money, I helped a snake trapped in a well, then a man in a deep pit and finally a tiger with a thorn in its foot. On my way back, the tiger gave me these things and then I slept in that man's house. That's all I know." "I see," said the raja. "That snake came here and saved me by first biting your daughter and then helping me to drive away the poison. The animal protected me and the human betrayed me."

The raja was furious! He ordered the man who had turned in the boy to be put in the pit, which was all ready for the boy! But the raja put him in and he was trampled to death. Since the boy was the first one to touch the princess, he was married to her and they lived happily in the palace.

Storyteller: Kalaicelvi

21. THE CLEVER SISTER

There were seven brothers and a little sister, who did all the cooking for her brothers. The youngest brother was lame, a cripple. Each day the brothers would go out to work, leaving their sister all alone, and come back and eat what she had cooked. One day, after the brothers had left her, a lion came to the house. He was in love with the girl and, seeing her all alone, said, "Come to me. I'm going to eat you." "Oh, please don't eat me. I'll do whatever you want, just like I do for my brothers." "I'll let you live if you agree to marry me." The girl was all alone and wanted to save her life, so she murmured her consent. "Come along to my house," ordered the lion. She refused, but the lion insisted and led the girl to his house where she cooked for him.

When the brothers came back, they found their sister missing. They cried in fright and went to find her. They looked and looked, and finally found her in the lion's house; the lion was away and she was crying inside. "The lion made me say I would marry it; if I didn't, he would eat me," she said. "He's coming back now to marry me." As they stood there trying to decide what to do, they heard the lion approaching. They didn't know what to do, so the sister said, "Hide in the rafters. Come down when I tell you."

As the seven brothers hid in the rafters, the lion entered. "Is the food ready?" he asked. "Yes." "Good. We're going to get married now." "All right. But we have a custom in our caste that the bridegroom must first take an oil bath. The wedding happens after the bath." "Fine. Get the water ready," said the lion. As the sister boiled up a vat of scalding hot water, the youngest brother, the lame one, said to the others, "I've got to pee." "Shut up, will you! If that lion hears us, he'll eat us!" "But I can't wait." "All right. All right. But just a little," said the other brothers.

He peed a little but a lot came out and trickled down from the rafters and into the rice the lion was about to eat! "Hey! What's this water coming down from the rafter?" "Oh! I made some rasam and put it up there; the cat must have tipped it over," she said. The next moment, the youngest brother said, "I've got to go, number two." "Be quiet. If that lion discovers us, we're dead." "But I've got to go!" "Just a little, then." But he dropped a huge pile! Right into the lion's food! "What's this?" he asked. "That? Oh, that's the meal I cooked for you," she said and he ate it.

After his meal, the lion asked, "Is the bath water ready?" She said it was and he asked how he should bathe. "Get right into the tub, and then you can rub on the oil," she said. The lion didn't know about hot water, so he climbed into the tub of boiling water, scalding his whole body, and died. The brothers came down from the rafters and went back home with their sister.

Storyteller: Alli

22. A FLEA'S REVENGE

A little flea went to a Chettiyar and said, "Sir, please give me some oil. Please." "Nothing doing," said the merchant. The flea got angry and decided to get revenge on the Chettiyar. Off it flew, and a centipede said, "Hey! Where are you going?" "I'm going to get revenge on the Chettiyar. Come along." So the centipede joined the flea, after which they met a cart, who asked them where they were going. "To get revenge on the merchant. Come along with us," said the flea. So the flea and the centipede climbed on the cart and rode along.

Next they came to a scorpion, who asked the same question and joined them. Now three of them had joined the flea: the centipede, the cart and the scorpion. Then a snake came along and said, "I'm going too," and got onto the cart. Soon they saw a grinding stone, who asked them, "Where are you going?" "To the Chettiyar's house." "Oh, then I'll join you," said the heavy stone. Finally a bhuta climbed on and they all rode on the cart to the merchant's house.

When they got to his house, the grinding stone climbed up the door and sat above the doorway; the scorpion hid inside a matchbox; the centipede climbed onto a flea-comb; the snake wound itself around a broom, and the bhuta stood outside the house. When they'd all done that, the flea said, "Tonight I'll jump on his head!"

That night, when the flea began to bite the Chettiyar's head, the man couldn't stand the pain! He reached for the matches to burn off the flea, but the scorpion bit him! Unable to bear that pain, he reached for the flea-comb, but the centipede bit him. Then he reached for the broom to beat off the centipede, but the snake bit him. It was all too much, so he ran toward the door, where the grinding stone fell on his head. Finally, he made it outside, where the bhuta ate him!

Storyteller: Alli