



### **A Pair Of Grey-Brown Eyes**

Valli's funeral procession snaked its way slowly through the teeming streets of the city, trailed by a mass of people. The crowd of mourners, their dark skin contrasting with their vibrant saris and lungis, beat their heads and screamed in sorrow as the procession wound its way through the mud roads, scattered with rubbish and flower petals. They cried out 'Akka!, Akka!' ('elder sister') as they flagellated themselves, craning their necks for a look at the garlanded corpse on the golden palanquin. The humid air was filled with the sound of wailing and funeral drums. The air stank of sweat and sorrow. Meanwhile, in a large mansion in the centre of the city, Sivan turned on his television, poured himself a drink and watched the procession with triumphant content.

Valli had been an unlikely politician. She had first burst onto the Tamil screen at the age of 16, playing the heroine in the runaway blockbuster 'Kuladeivam' (Family Deity). For the next twenty years, she went on to play major roles in numerous South Indian films, captivating her primarily dark-skinned audiences with her fair skin and gray-brown eyes. Then, at the height of her fame, she had abandoned her acting career and turned to politics. She had her detractors. What did this spoilt, rich Brahmin actress know about the dirty, caste-driven world of Indian politics? But she had proved them all wrong, clawing her way to the top with steely ambition. Valli's policies pandered to the poor, the farmers, the backbone of the state. In return for their votes, they were given sacks of rice, alcohol and TVs. And the masses adored her. She was the people's leader, their benevolent elder sister, their 'Akka'.

Sivan on the other hand had no charisma to speak of. The only thing larger-than-life about him was his voluminous belly which protruded like a watermelon from the folds of his dhoti. What he lacked in charm he made up for in cunning. He had wormed his way into Valli's inner circle using his talent for flattery and his ruthless determination. Despite his influence over her, he loathed Valli and all she stood for. While she gloried in the public's adulation, he, Sivan, the master puppeteer, the prince-in-waiting, was largely unknown to the masses. He longed for the rapturous applause he deserved. That's why he killed her.

He had started administering the poison months ago, drop by drop. Within 3 months, her

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organs had started failing. Within 6, she was on dialysis. Throughout, her loyal aide Sivan was by her side, catering to her every need. Even as an army of mourners crowded outside her home and prayed for their beloved Akka's recovery, Valli's condition deteriorated. Sivan, with barely-concealed excitement, knew he was hours from his prize. He prepared a solemn speech and waited. That night, news emerged that Valli, chief minister of the state of Tamil Nadu, had died from a heart attack.

Sivan looked up from the podium. For the first time in his life, he had an audience. In his inauguration speech, he talked of the glorious legacy Akka had left behind. When he was finished, he was sworn in as Chief Minister. As he walked down the carpeted stairs, he noticed something from the corner of his eyes. Looking down at him almost accusingly from a poster was the face of Valli. As he walked towards his seat, he tried to ignore her stare but it was to no avail. Valli watched, a silent spectator, as her killer took power.

In the weeks following Valli's death, the people's sorrow poured out onto the streets. Life-sized cutouts of Akka lined the roads. So did massive flags bearing her face. Grandiose titles were conferred on her posthumously. 'Revolutionary Leader'. 'Incarnation of the Goddess Durga'. 'Defender of the Oppressed'.

Sivan's party members never stopped reminding him that he had Valli to thank for his current position. In order to hold on to power, they advised, he needed to keep her memory alive. His duties as Chief Minister revolved largely around glorifying her memory and making speeches about her legacy. Whether naming a school after her, unveiling her statue or opening a temple dedicated to 'Akka', there was no escape from Valli. Yes, he was now Chief Minister. Yes, he now held ultimate power. Yes, Valli was gone. Or was she? Sivan had to start every speech by bowing to Valli's poster, clasping his hands together in devotion and shedding mock tears of sorrow. It seemed to him that in death, Valli was more inescapable than ever. Everywhere he went, he saw her face. On banners, posters and billboards. Those gray-brown eyes that had captivated so many people now seemed to watch him like a hawk. Everywhere he turned, he was confronted by those all-knowing eyes. They watched him, they followed him and they mocked him.

Sivan sat in his darkened bedroom and closed his eyes, trying to shut out Valli's face. He

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had just returned from a rally where his meticulously prepared speech had been drowned out by the crowds chanting Akka's name. With shaking hands, he poured himself a large glass of palm toddy, the locally brewed alcohol. He spoke reassuring words to himself. The woman is dead, Sivan! She's gone! It you who holds the power, not her. He downed his drink in one gulp. As he groped for the bottle again, his eyes fell upon the label. 'Akka Palm Toddies. We Thank You For Your Vote'. His hands trembling, he turned the bottle around. And there she was. He recoiled in horror and let the bottle clatter to the floor. Valli's face, floating in a pool of amber-hued toddy, looked up at him from the ground. Her eyes sought his and her gaze followed him as it had done for so many months now. And as Sivan squinted in the darkness, he could almost swear he saw her lips curl into a sly smile.

**Raghav Dwvedi, Year 7**



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