

# **Table for Four**

## **(Excerpts)**

**K.Srilata**

### **Prologue**

On a quaint evening back in Prithvi uncle's house, two stories sat down to dinner with me at the listening table. Prim little play-dough creatures. Twistable. Plottable. Tell-able.

Alas, not so my story.

*"Speak up. Do your worst. Make your meaning clear,"* I have begged of the wily creature. But he has remained inside me.

Twisting the knife of doubt.

Stalking my thoughts.

Slipping through the net of sense like sand from between fingers. Resisting narration in a spin of whys, hows and what-really –happeneds.

Refusing expiation.

When it comes to him, not even the listening table succeeds.

But that evening at the listening table is a story by itself...

## **Chapter One: More than Just Pickle and Bread**

I had this strange sense of dressing for a performance, this Micawberish feeling that something was bound to turn up.

Rummaging inside my suitcase for my indigo blue salwar kurta - the only Indian outfit I had carried with me to Santa Cruz, I wondered just why Prithvi uncle had chosen to emerge from his seclusion and invite us to dinner?

I felt a bit strange in the kurta, having never worn it in my three years here. Santa Cruz was a small, earthquake-prone town, very white-hippie. A town I couldn't read at first. And so, with the caution of a stranger in a foreign town, I had chosen to blend in, never venturing beyond jeans and T-shirts.

When I emerged from my room, I very nearly collided with Sandra. She had on a short black skirt and a pink top. Sandra carried herself well in Western formals, partly because she didn't have an

ounce of extra flesh and partly, I supposed, because she had grown up wearing them. She also nearly always wore make up. Today it was pink lipstick and eye shadow. The Barbie look. A pair of hematite earrings dangled saucily from her ears. Her hair was freshly washed.

“Wonder where Derek is,” I said.

Sandra pointed to the bottle of wine that rested on the kitchen counter. “Must be getting dressed,” she winked.

Of Prithvi uncle too, there was no sign, though the kitchen smelt reassuringly of masala and I caught a whiff of something that I thought was biriyani.

For the first time in the three years I had lived there, the kitchen smelt neither of Mexico nor of Kamalakka’s remembered recipes.

Suddenly, the front door opened and Prithvi uncle entered looking like a baby wizard. He was wearing a somewhat faded ikkat kurta over a pair of trousers that were inches too long. His eyes searched our faces as though looking for something. And then, he gestured in the direction of the listening table.

“Please,” he said. “There’s more than just pickle and bread,” his eyes glinted.

The expression he had worn on coming in had vanished without a trace. Sandra and I exchanged guilty looks. Had he overheard us discussing his eating habits?

## **Chapter Two: The Listening Table**

He had always been a bit of a recluse. Kept to himself most of the time. Sandra, Derek and I saw little of him during the day. Sometimes we wondered if he had left that house with its neglected garden altogether. But every now and then there would be some small sign to say Prithvi uncle was still around – an unwashed plate in the sink that was not mine or Sandra's or Derek's, kitchen lights that Sandra swore came on in the wee hours of the morning, bread crumbs under the table when Derek hadn't been eating bread, a new bottle of gonghura pickle, and once, a copy of Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* with his name on it that Sandra discovered on the living room sofa. There was one direct sign too - those post-it notes on the fridge that he left us from time to time.

In all my three years at Number 14, Bay Street, I met Prithvi uncle exactly four times.

The first time was when I went to check out the house. I had been haunting the UC Santa Cruz Campus Housing office for weeks. The woman there must have been sick of me. Her good mornings had certainly gotten feebler. But I had had little luck with my apartment hunt. Either the rent was way too high or the place too far from campus. I was just beginning to wonder if this business would ever end when that hand-written poster appeared on the Housing office bulletin board.

*Nice room with a view of the outside. No fuss landlord. Minimum interference. Rent \$250.*

*14, Bay Street, Santa Cruz.*

*Phone Prithvi at 831-420-5130*

My eyes popped. At the \$250 (which was really nothing at all for a room in that neighbourhood) and at the name Prithvi – for it sounded Indian. There were so few Indians in Santa Cruz. I was curious. Was he Indian Indian like me? Or Indian born and raised in America? I phoned the number mentioned in the advertisement, wondering all the while what the catch was. A voice at the other end answered, “Good Evening, Prithvi here,” in an accent that was most definitely urban Indian, though it carried traces of some years spent in America.

He proceeded to give me directions over the phone in a slow, careful sort of way. “Remember, corner house, Bay Street, opposite the pond,” he said finally, “You can come this evening. You aren’t doing anything else anyway. Come and check out the place.” It was only after I had hung up that the oddity of what he had said hit me. *You aren’t doing anything else anyway.* How the hell would he know that? Or was he just being presumptuous? It hit me too that he had asked me nothing about myself...

\*\*\*\*\*

He was sitting outside in a garden that badly needed weeding staring at the pond across the house. When I went up close, he waved me to an empty chair beside him.

“You must be Maya,” he said, “So you have got yourself a bicycle? Good town for bikers, this. It is a short ride to the university from here – not more than 7 minutes. You are a student from UCSC, no?” He was less deliberate now than he had been on the phone. His eyes reminded me of enormous mirrors.

“You would like to see the house? Yes?” he asked, and stood up without really waiting for an answer. I saw then that he bordered on

being a dwarf. He was that small. Beside him, I felt like a giant. Elf-man, I thought. That's what he looks like. An elf man.

“I will show you your room first,” the man said, as though it had already been decided that I would take the place.

We walked in through the front door, past the living room and kitchen and turned left down a long corridor. The room he meant to show me was at the very end and we passed two rooms on either side of the corridor before we came to it. It was a mid-sized room and well-furnished. Bed, study table, halogen lamp, a small walk-in wardrobe. Looked like a scene from heaven after some of the other ramshackle rooms I had seen...

\*\*\*\*\*

“I have two other boarders – both students from the university. One of them is a girl, also from India. You will share the bath and the kitchen with them,” Prithvi uncle explained. The bath was right opposite the room he had shown me and I peeped in. Blue tiles, a bathtub at the corner, a washbasin. The tiles looked a bit worn but the floor was clean and dry.

“You would like to meet the other boarders, yes?” he asked, and again, without waiting for a reply, marched me up the corridor.

The first door he knocked on was Derek's. A gaunt looking American, almost as tall as Prithvi uncle, opened the door to us.

“Sorry to bother you Derek but I'd like you to meet our new boarder, Maya – also a student at UCSC.”

Derek put out his hand. His fingers were long and thin but they clasped my hand with surprising strength.

“Pleased to meet you, Maya,” he said. His voice was deep, his eyes grey and reflective, as though there was something lurking underneath.

“Derek used to be a war correspondent with NBC,” Prithvi said, “There is no one in this country who hasn't watched him on T.V. He covered Afghanistan, you know.”

I said I was afraid I had not really followed the Afghanistan war, that it must have been both exciting as well as nerve wracking for him to have covered it.

“No,” said Derek with a thin smile, “Not really, not after a while. You get used to it the way you get used to eating cereal and toast every morning for breakfast. It is pointless, not exciting.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Chapter Five: Hyderabad dum biriyani**

Maybe it was the wine. Maybe it was the oddness of having gonghura in Santa Cruz. Or maybe, it was Prithvi uncle himself and his dramatic entry. But my nervousness about my bags and the flight melted away for the moment. I had a sense of occupying an in-between space, a space of transit. What lay ahead were unresolved questions like black clouds that admitted no light. But for the moment I was not thinking about them.

Strangely, it was this moment that Prithvi uncle decided to seize. “So what did you make of my notes?” he asked. “Did you think I was a little bit crazy? Maybe?” he grinned, showing yellow teeth. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Sandra rushed headlong into the silence, “We loved them, Prithvi uncle, simply loved them.” “But we did wonder why we saw so little of you,” I added, wondering if Sandra was as drunk as I was...

\*\*\*\*\*

“There are layers, aren’t there, to you girls?” he said, “So many layers – like Draupadi’s saree... And unknown to you, these layers

have influenced your relationships, colouring them in ways you would never have imagined.”

Layers like Draupadi’s saree, he had said. How true! What the others knew of me was only the tip of the iceberg. And of the others, in turn, I knew so little. I knew next to nothing of Derek’s childhood, except for the fact that his aunt had raised him. I knew something of his days in Afghanistan. He had told me about Halim – but only a little. As for Sandra, I realized suddenly that she had never once spoken to me of her family. I remembered her obsession with Orkut. Was there a story there somewhere? I thought of my own story and wondered what the others had made of my refusal to go down to the beach. “But Maya, it is a lovely beach. You can’t come to Santa Cruz and not do the board walk!” Derek had protested. Sandra had been far more blunt, “You must be nuts, girl, not to want to go to the beach! There is something the matter with you.”

That was when Prithvi uncle proposed it. That we tell each other our stories. “I promise,” he said, “to listen well.”

How easy he made it all sound! That we simply up and tell each other our stories. If only I could do that, I thought. If only... But there was no way. No way I could set down a burden like mine.

“Think of it all as a game, if that helps,” Prithvi uncle said, looking at me, “A game with rules.”

And then he outlined what he called “the rules” for our benefit...

\*\*\*\*\*

“Prithvi uncle,” I said, looking him in the eye, “You will have to excuse me. I have nothing to tell. There is no story. Nothing of note has ever happened to me. Nothing that would interest anyone, at any rate. I am a terribly boringly person.”

He looked at me when I said this, a slow smile spreading through his face, “Surely, Maya, that is not quite true.”

“But I am willing to listen to your story and to Sandra’s, if she will tell hers. That is of course, if you don’t mind my not returning the honour,” I said.

“Sandra?” Prithvi uncle asked, his eyes boring into her. Sandra sighed, as though something inside her had finally crumbled. “Yes,” she said, “Yes. I will do it. I will tell my story.” Her fingers, constantly skiing down her hair, were resting on her lap now.

“Want to go first?” Prithvi uncle asked, drawing himself up.

And Sandra, with the look of someone who had just walked into an enchanted forest, began to tell her story.

To us. And to the listening table.