

**Bright Pink Butterfly Clips****By Subashree Krishnaswamy**

'Ayyo!' yelled Prema, pushing a wisp of hair from her sleep-burdened eyes, when a sharp pinch nipped her arm. The tempting pink butterfly wings catching tantalizing silver glints in the sun faded away from her vision when her elder sister hissed, "It is already seven. You're going to get up or no? I'm going to have oil-bath in five minutes flat. And I'm going to take an hour." Her father's noisy gargling and blowing of nose which often woke up the new-born baby next door would take another five minutes; Prema slowly folded the bed-sheet, picked up her pillow, and rolled up her mat.

In her haste she swallowed a blob of toothpaste, but managed to ready herself for a quick bath. Her teeth chattered when the tepid water hit her skin on such a wet day.

On rainy days they usually heated the water in a big pot in the kitchen – her mother must have emptied the hot water into the bucket in the bathroom a while ago to heat up another pot. Four of them had to bathe, after all.

After a bath, first the customary obeisance to the gods whose piercing eyes gazed down from the framed calendar pictures haphazardly arranged on a couple of shelves in the kitchen. After helping herself to a liberal pinch of *vibhuti* – the sacred ash – from an old tin box in the pooja-alcove and smearing it on the forehead, Prema first prostrated herself in front of Ganesha, the elephant God, remover of obstacles, then shifted gaze to his brother Muruga, her special god, and then bowed reverentially to their parents, Siva and Parvati. She didn't dare forget their brother-in-law Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi. She rounded off her prayers with a salute to Hanuman, that powerful monkey god who moved mountains to help Lord Rama. To every god she asked the same thing: "Please god, let me have the butterfly clips."

"What's taking you so long in front of the gods, today? Maths test-a?", her mother asked, plonking the kanji, the gruel, on the only stool in the kitchen. Wiping the sweat off her face with the ends of her drab sari - the once-yellow sprigs which cheerfully trailed all over the sari had faded into fungus-like blobs - and pushing the straggly strands of hair escaping from the sloppy, hurriedly twisted bun on her head, she turned towards the stove. Would her mother, for once at least, coo out to them, bobbed hair swinging on the sides of her face, and coax them to eat cornflakes off gleaming bowls? Just like in the TV ads. What did that cornflakes, crisp and golden brown, taste like? The milk would

cascade down in a gentle swirl, and the immaculately dressed, cheerful TV mother with a deft finger drizzled sugar from a fancy jar.

And why couldn't her father use that plastic card that could be swished to buy just about anything. He wrote the accounts for 'Karuppan and Bros. Oil Shop' on a greasy table among tins of cooking oil, under a fan that swayed violently and gave out more noise than breeze.

Every morning before he left for work, he meticulously tucked the polythene milk-cover containing a single fifty-rupee note into his dog-eared wallet and jingled the bus fare in his hands.

"Just finish the kanji quickly and go get dressed for school," said her mother, thumping Prema on her back. The virtues of the boring nine-grain kanji, which her parents never tired of telling her, boomed in her ears. "Good for health." Who wanted to be so disgustingly healthy?

Truth to tell, Prema couldn't really complain about the food at home. After all, her mother was a cook's assistant. She was usually called to help prepare south Indian food in people's homes for all kinds of traditional ceremonies. Deaths, engagements, or special rituals before marriage, her mother knew what to make for each one of those. No chillies for one, no 'English vegetables' for another, and only pepper for some. But every occasion demanded some deep-fried

snacks. If people were kind, her mother was allowed to pack some for herself. But sometimes if they didn't want to mess up their kitchens, her mother would be asked to make them at home. Those were the best times.

Prema and her sister often carefully sealed the goodies by running a lighted candle over the plastic covers, and pressing them while they were still hot (burnt fingers were a small price to pay), then feasted on the broken pieces, often inviting friends over.

It was a good thing that the sun had managed to push its way through the clouds. Trudging back from school, her feet automatically slowed themselves near the 'Lakhs and Crores Popularty Shoppe' on the busy Gobi Chetti Street. Every visit to the shop guaranteed a surprise, and as the enormous golden-toothed proprietor – who was called 'pea stuck on to an egg' by all the neighbourhood kids – was fond of saying: 'You can get everything here, everything, except your mother!'

Plastic buckets, wooden mops, pop-up dustbins and gaudy garbage cans swayed invitingly, forming a colourful awning for the shop. This was not a place for dawdlers. Once you squeezed yourself in through the doorway (and stooped if you were too tall), you'd have to walk purposefully towards your goal. Packets of moth balls, dish-scrubbers or geometry boxes could very well whiz over your head, but you never had to duck or dodge. The efficient salespeople in the shop

would do any cricket team proud, such safe pairs of hands they possessed. For a few days now Prema made her way resolutely to the counter that sold 'fancy items'. She had her eye on a pair of butterfly hair clips - wholesomely pink like the mittai, that jaw-stretching sticky sweet - which fastened with a deft click. Who could resist the bright 'mittai-pink' wings speckled with silver dots, the stone-eyes glinting like diamonds, and the black feelers bouncing like springs? It was even better than her friend Meena's snake-clip which her aunt had got from Bombay. An ingenious thing that was, winding around her ponytail, the crystals winking naughtily from the hood like ever so many eyes.

They cost forty rupees, those butterfly clips! How could she ask her parents? The salesperson in charge of that counter, a toothless old man who wheezed through his nose, promised to keep them for her for a week. When he saw her edging towards the counter for the fifth time in the week, he said, half-hoping that she might just buy them: "Do you want to try them on?"

She gingerly took them in her hand as if they were heirlooms, went to the mirror flashing a grateful smile, smoothed her hair, and fastened them in front, on either side of the parting, and turned this way and that.

Now you wouldn't call Gobi Chetti Street a tourist beat; it was neither near the temple precincts nor close to the beach. He must be an old India hand then, this white man with an expensive camera coiling around his neck like a snake around

Lord Siva's neck. Searching, probably, for the authentic Indian experience.

When he entered the shop, people in the shop giggled and dug each other – in baggy shorts and an Indian kurta, his ponytail bobbing behind a face as red as the traffic signal, he looked, well, like an '*arai loosu*', someone with a screw loose, as they called anyone who seemed bizarre to their eyes.

When he saw Prema preening herself in front of the mirror, he saw in it the makings of an award-winning photograph. When she giggled shyly, the proprietor urged him on, "Photo? Take photo saar," eager for the name of his shop to travel across seven seas, to be displayed in cold, foggy 'phoren' shores. With his permission, the white man shepherded Prema outside. Prema hesitated, not knowing what her mother would say. Besides she didn't know the etiquette about these things. What would this 'Yinglish-man' want her to do? And what would she say to him? Her sister, for sure, would have twisted her ears and dragged her home. The proprietor, who knew her all her life, egged her on.

Prema balanced precariously at the edge of the busy pavement, the lettering of the 'Lakhs and Crores Popularty Shoppe' forming a fluorescent blue halo behind her, squinting her eyes in the sun. He wanted it all for the perfect photograph of the Indian girl: gaudy pink clips, shiny yellow dress, plastic green slippers, the 'designer' schoolbag, the shop's delicious misspelt name.

Thank god, it was a Saturday, the day they were allowed to wear 'colour dress' to school. Lucky Prema didn't have on her nasty old blue uniform – the hemline that had been let down circled her thigh like an indigo blue bandage, five shades darker than the rest of her faded skirt it was. She was glad too she was wearing her yellow frock, her favourite, the one with the invisible side pockets. How she had begged for those pockets! The tailor who had overheard her told her mother: "It's no problem to give a pocket. I'll do it. Poor thing, she's asking." She placed the heavy schoolbag in a corner and stylishly put her hand inside the pocket. But the man swung the bag back around her shoulder, carefully arranging the label: 'Gucci Slinky Lady'. The lettering in perfect Gucci style had to be flaunted. At first, Prema looked grimly into the camera. But he wanted her to smile. She dimpled obligingly, covering her mouth with her hand to hide the wide gap. But he was adamant – he would take a snap with the gap-toothed smile or not at all. Prema gave in; if it meant that it was the only way she could get into a photo, she would open her mouth wider than Lord Krishna did for his mother. It was a perfect shot. The two butterflies looked thirsty enough to take off from her head for a much-needed sip of honey.

He was a kind one, this white man. He knew that photographs were still a novelty to people like Prema. He always carried with him one of those instant cameras as well and usually gifted a photo to whoever obliged him. Like a magician he whipped out a photo and handed it to Prema and patted her on the head.

Why, this was the first ever photo of hers. You really couldn't count the family photo taken in her uncle Ramesh's wedding. There you had to search among twenty odd people, and Prema always doubted if that mosquito-like speck was really her. Look at this, the whole photo was filled with only her. And how stylish she looked, with those clips. Indelibly preserved for posterity. For all to see. Better than owning them, in fact. Wait till her sister saw it.

She returned the clips distractedly, and purposefully headed towards the photo frames. Her gaze fell on a gilt frame, the one with peacocks perched on the two edges, the feathers hanging on either side gracefully. Were those bright-red cherries in their mouths?

O, the frame cost fifty rupees!