

# The great *nellikai* heist

What began with  
*uppu-kaara* ended with  
me stuck in a wall

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When I was in Class 4, my friend Surya began bringing *uppu-kaara pudu*—salt-chilli powder—to class in a small paper *potlam*. Just as our teacher, Parameshwari Ma'am, turned to the blackboard, Surya would quietly unfold the paper, bend down and tongue the mixture.

Those of us without *potlams*, like Karthik and me, watched him longingly as he let out little muted pops. Sometimes, overcome by kindness, Surya would do us an *upkaara* and share his *uppu-kaara*. Thus went life when, in the middle of April, Shankara walked in after lunch, chest puffed out, and said, "How many days will you fellows keep licking this powder?"

What did he mean? Surya asked, slightly offended. Shankara said, "Nanjappa's house has three *nellikai* (gooseberry) trees."

For the next two days, we spent our PT period standing on our bicycle backseat drooling at Nanjappa's *nellikais*. Surya couldn't take it anymore. He climbed onto the grey stone wall, hoping to jump in, but we were such *chultanis* that a fall would have broken a bone or two.

While we were wondering what to do, Karthik noticed a ditch near the wall. And like the end of *ringa-ringaroses*, the four of us fell down and began digging with our bare hands. Somebody or the other kept interrupting our work, eyeing what we were doing, so we worked in shifts. Using our cycles as camouflage, we dug with stones and sticks. Karthik even brought a large screwdriver, smuggled in by poking a hole in his shorts pocket. In four days, we had a hole big enough to crawl through.

Surya and Shankara were like *kad-dis* (sticks), so they slipped through easily, while Karthik and I stood guard. When they returned looking like children from detergent advertisements, we squealed—bulging pockets full of neon-green *nellikais*. That day, half the class were tap-tapping their tongues to the tune of our loot.

A week of this bliss passed before Karthik betrayed me. I was a rotund boy and did not feel comfortable squeezing through holes in walls. My friends felt I wasn't putting in equal effort. That afternoon, Karthik announced, "*Dadiya* (fatty), today you are coming."

Before I could utter the "ba" of *beda*, I was crawling through the hole, rehearsing lies for Amma about my uniform. But once we reached the trees, I forgot everything. Such glorious green stars! We shook the tree till it rained *nellikais* on us like hail. We stuffed our pockets and headed back.

As I crawled through, I saw something strange: a pair of large black boots right in my face. I looked up. Lighthouse Satish, our PT teacher. Shankara and Surya, who had crawled out before me, were crying, holding their ears in monkey pose.

Upper body inside, lower body outside, I was stuck like in some medieval torture device. Karthik, roused to mischief by a free bum, began stomping on it, cackling, "*Ey Dadiya*, stucka? This is why I say eat less." I was in tears.

How was I to explain to Karthik what was awaiting him on the other side?