

This excerpt is from the first chapter of my novella, *In Her Time*. My novella follows the lives of two protagonists: Rukmini and Padma. This chapter unpacks Rukmini's past, travelling with her as she experiences becoming a woman in the rural India of the 1940s and 1950s.

Rukmini

Repalle, 1946

A silence rang through the night, taking away Rukmini's childhood forever.

Rukmini's older sister Neerajakshi, or Niru as Rukmini called her in awe and slight fear, who was sixteen years old, died in childbirth. Rukmini was seven years old. She watched her sister, full as a brimming pot of milk, full of life, deflate and fade to black. Rukmini watched her father Babji cry, softly beating his chest. Babji kept repeating, "Ayyo, Niru," his sorrow beyond articulation. Rukmini herself was confused, knowing death only through her mother's passing, yet again in childbirth. Her mother died giving birth to the elusive boy child her father and the family so hankered after, the boy himself stillborn. How sad, the neighbours often said, that the boy didn't live.

Rukmini paced around the house that night, watching the elders cry till their tears ran dry. Babji's sister Amman-atta took the pride of the place near Niru's head while her father sat a little way away. Rukmini wondered where the little one went, but she didn't ask anyone. She didn't even know if Niru had a boy or a girl. Rukmini thought it was a boy because she believed that boy babies killed their mothers.

She watched her father's grief from a distance with dry eyes and a heavy heart. She watched his face turn anguish into sorrow and guilt, his eyes plain for her to read. Amman-atta fanned Niru's face with a fan made of dried palm leaves, her sobs loud and intrusive. Rukmini tried not to look at Amman-atta much, her crying made Rukmini want to shut her ears. Rukmini focused on the quiet grief of her father instead, which was oddly comforting

in its composure. Rukmini's almond-shaped eyes didn't tear up, but her small, round body, all of four-feet and six-inches tall, shook with fear looking at her sister's corpse. She wondered briefly if she should go sit with her father but then felt too restless to sit.

Rukmini continued to pace around the house, her tiny feet warm on the cold stone floor. Her small hands lightly touched the stone walls of the house as she walked to feel the familiarity of her family home, her childhood a part of the generations of dust and wear it accumulated silently. Rukmini sat down in one corner finally after her thighs started to ache. She spread a *chattai* on the floor, the hardness of the grass mat an accustomed comfort and went to sleep, thinking of Niru.

It was a black night full of mourning that gave way to the palest pink dawn that was softly touched with the grief of enduring life. Rukmini remembered little of the night and nothing of the days that followed as her life wore on.

Rukmini spent the next few days making herself invisible and unheard. Instinctively, she knew that the adults didn't have time for a little weed like her. She played in the yard behind the house with sticks and stones; she drew on the hard cold floor with chalk and made a doll out of dried straw to keep her company. It wasn't much of a doll to look at, just a few lumps of straw with a face drawn on it and a colourful piece of cloth crudely hand-stitched on, but it was the only company she had. Rukmini resurfaced amongst the adults during meal times, and was fed unquestioningly and distractedly, the fare basic and hearty. She made sure to catch a glimpse of her father at meal times. He was either intimidatingly alone or with a group of men and women, all of them clucking at her father's misfortune. She would sit and watch him for a few minutes and feel slightly comforted.

Rukmini missed Niru every day. Niru was the only person who really saw Rukmini and tended to her as a full human. For Niru, Rukmini wasn't just a hungry mouth to feed or a thin body to clothe and keep warm.

Since Niru's wedding last year, Rukmini had wandered aimlessly around the house not knowing what to do with herself, her father too fatherly and distant, until Niru came back home full-bellied and radiant six months ago. Rukmini was happy again, until the night of the childbirth which took Niru away from her forever. Rukmini named her little doll Niru without much thought. She conversed with the doll, told her the rules of their games while calling her Niru and she took a little comfort from that too.

Rukmini watched everyone in the house closely. Many of them were people only vaguely familiar to her. Relatives from nearby whose names she remembered with little effort and relatives from faraway who were strangers to her—all of them now staying with them in their five roomed house. The women slept in two rooms, the living room and the kitchen. Her father shared his bedroom with two of his brothers and some kids slept on the floor of the room. Another room was allotted to the seven kids the various adults brought with them. The fifth room was full of stragglers and an odd assortment of people: those who played card games all night and went to bed at dawn, some old women who couldn't fall asleep, an odd relative who was just staying the night, and Rukmini.

Rukmini normally slept on the floor in her father's room. She and Niru shared a cosy corner, with a thick carpet to sleep on and two soft blankets to cover themselves with. After Niru's wedding, Rukmini spent many a night sprawled on the carpet, not used to the extra room she suddenly inherited. After Niru came back, Rukmini gave her the entire carpet to sleep on and made herself comfortable next to Niru on the floor. She didn't mind. She was happy to have Niru back.

For the past eleven nights Rukmini took her blanket and slept wherever she found an empty corner in the fifth room.

It was the eleventh night since the death of her elder sister.

That night, Amman-atta found Rukmini in one of the corners, trying to make the stone floor a little more comfortable using her doll as a pillow.

“Ah, here you are.” Amman-atta brought her portly frame into Rukmini’s corner on the floor which suddenly felt warmer for her presence.

“I have hardly seen you around,” the older woman said, tucking the folds of her white sari under her feet. Rukmini had only ever seen Amman-atta in a white sari, which was typical of a widow. Niru told Rukmini that Amman-atta became a widow at the age of twelve and has since worn only white saris and kept her head shaved. Rukmini accepted this information and understood why women prayed so hard for their husbands and future-husbands’ lives. Prayers were a small price to pay to keep colour in your life.

Rukmini watched the dents and folds of Amman-atta’s bald head, as she uncovered it, probably for the first time all day, and fanned it. It was a hot time of the year and keeping her head covered could not have been comfortable, Rukmini thought.

“I’ve been around the house. Nowhere else.” Rukmini was scared of crossing boundaries she didn’t know she had. Was she supposed to have been with the women folk the whole time?

“Doing what?” Amman-atta asked, fanning the back of her head.

“Nothing.” Rukmini pushed her doll farther in the blanket.

“Nothing? How can someone do nothing for eleven days?” Amman-atta didn’t look angry, which gave Rukmini some courage.

“When will everyone leave?” The question escaped without warning from Rukmini’s lips and Amman-atta peered into Rukmini’s face with a frown.

“It’s just that... I want to sleep in my own spot and I haven’t spoken to father in so long...” Rukmini’s voice trailed away on a pleading note.

Amman-atta lay down next to Rukmini’s spot, resting her uncovered head on the cold, stone floor. She looked at Rukmini for a couple of seconds before she said, “It’s going to be a little while before people leave. There is going to be a wedding in the house soon.”

Rukmini sat up straight. A wedding meant good food and possibly a new set of clothes for her. She could wear flowers in her hair and help light lamps around the house.

“Whose wedding?” Rukmini asked, thinking of golden, fat *laddoos* with cashews pressed into them. She could eat a dozen of those round deep-fried flour and sugar sweets if she were allowed. Niru always gave her an extra one after everyone had eaten, but now Niru was dead and Rukmini didn’t know who to ask for things.

Amman-atta was looking at Rukmini with a pitiful expression that Rukmini didn’t quite understand.

“Whose wedding?” Rukmini asked again, her voice insistent. She laid her fingers questioningly on the older woman’s arm, adding a little pressure when there was no reply.

“Yours,” Amman-atta said and sat up once again, looking more prepared for the conversation. Rukmini went still.

“It’s nothing to be worried about,” Amman-atta said calmly. “Your father and the elders thought of everything. It will make everyone happy too. And it’s not someone you don’t know - how nice is that? It is your brother-in-law Raman. You’ll be taking Niru’s place in their house.”

Rukmini felt a numbness spread through her feet and up her legs, making her unable to move.

“You know Raman. You like him right?” Amman-atta prodded.

Rukmini nodded. “I like you too, Amman-atta,” she said.

“Well then. See - you think he is nice. Niru didn’t know him at all when she married him. You are so lucky,” Amman-atta said, looking satisfied.

“But... What does being married mean? Will I also die?” Rukmini didn’t understand what was happening around her. She thought she had eight more years before she got married, five months to grow a belly, six months to come back to her father’s house and then she’d also lie on the floor dead and everyone would cry. Why was Amman-atta asking her to get married right away? She was only seven years old. This should not be on her schedule yet.

Amman-atta chuckled with a little sadness in her eyes. She put her hand on Rukmini’s head and stroked her tightly braided hair.

“Crazy girl, you won’t die.” She chuckled again.

“But Amma and Niru...” Rukmini knew that women who stayed married died.

“Well.. it’s true that your mom and Niru passed away in childbirth. It’s an unfortunate coincidence. My heart breaks for my brother who first lost his wife and then his daughter the same way.” Amman-atta wiped a stray tear with the corner of her sari, as Rukmini watched her.

“Rukmini...” Amman-atta’s voice became stronger as she spoke. “Rukmini, you won’t die. You’ll be married and when the time comes for Lord Shiva to bless you with a baby, I’ll make sure that you and the baby will live for a hundred years. May you have four boys.”

Amman-atta sat back feeling accomplished.

“Why boys?” Rukmini asked, she always felt awkward playing with boys because they never wanted her around.

“Because... it’s just better to have boys. Girls are nice too, they are a treasure,” Amman-atta said kindly. “But boys will take care of you when you are older and also help keep the family line alive.”

Rukmini didn’t understand most of what Amman-atta was saying, but she nodded along. She was glad that she wasn’t going to die, but she still didn’t want to get married and leave her father’s house.

“In a month,” Amman-atta said. “Raman and his father Subaiyya are going back to their village to bring Niru’s jewellery and things. Raman also has some work he needs to attend to, *thammudu* was saying.” Rukmini realised that she never called Niru as *akka* since there was no distance between them, but Amman-atta called her younger brother, Rukmini’s father, as *thammudu*, which even if it meant younger brother, Amman-atta said so reverentially that *thammudu* might as well have been older brother or *anna*.

“Niru’s jewelry? Why?” Rukmini liked Niru’s jewellery, there were some beautiful pieces she remembered from the wedding a year ago.

“Then what? We just let all the jewellery stay with them? No chance. The reason for the wedding is to keep all of the jewellery and the good alliance tied to our family. No, they have to bring it all back,” Amman-atta said settling down next to Rukmini.

Rukmini realised that the older woman meant to sleep next to her for the night, though she had come over without a blanket or a pillow. Rukmini draped a little of her blanket over Amman-atta’s ample form and turned away from her, curling into a foetal position, clutching her straw doll to herself. She tried to picture her brother-in-law’s face as

she closed her eyes, but she had a hard time. Before she knew it, Rukmini fell asleep, unmindful of Amman-atta's potbellied snores.

She woke up feeling like she should talk to Babji. She wasn't sure what she would say or even if she had anything to say, but she felt that she should talk to her father. She washed her face and mouth. She took a quick, lukewarm bath at the well with her bucket and dented steel tumbler.

Rukmini walked around the house with her damp hair tied in a hasty plait trying to find her father. She knew it would soon be time for their first meal of the day and Babji would definitely come to the living room for food. If she missed her chance to talk to him now, she wouldn't see him till late afternoon, when everyone ate again. Rukmini was determined to talk to him now.

As she walked through the house Rukmini noticed that the women gave her a smile and the men pointedly looked away after a vague nod. *They know about the wedding,* Rukmini thought. She wandered around the house with thoughts too big for her seven-year-old head. She took deep breaths of the sambar being cooked for the morning meal, her stomach rumbling at the smell of the savory lentil broth full of juicy vegetables, shredded coconut and ghee. Rukmini loved ghee and Niru often gave her a breakfast of hot *idlis* doused with the clarified butter. Rukmini didn't even want the accompaniments that the elders took with their rice cakes - a spicy peanut chutney or tangy coriander chutney. She would take big bites of the soft fluffy idli, wet with ghee, feeling content. She clenched and unclenched her stomach at the memory, telling herself she needed to find her father.

She finally spotted Babji at the well, washing his feet. He had probably been out all morning and just gotten back. Rukmini's pace quickened as she walked toward him. She still

had no idea what she would say to him. Babji saw her and smiled in a sad way. She smiled back.

“Ruku,” he said, rubbing his left foot over his right, trying to get all the dirt out.

Rukmini loved the shortened version of her name that her father called her. It sounded like an endearment. He only did it occasionally but when he did Rukmini felt loved.

“*Nanna*,” Rukmini said. While most kids called their fathers *Nanna-garu* with the respectful suffix, Rukmini and Niru always called their father Nanna. “Babji pampers his daughters way too much,” Rukmini heard many a relative say about her father. She would hear the occasional murmurs when he brought them new clothes without occasion, had someone help them with housework, and most often, when he’d bring them books to read. Whenever an aunt or uncle would catch Rukmini or Niru sprawled on their father’s chair on the verandah outside the front door reading a book, they would cluck their tongues in disapproval and say that Babji pampered his daughters too much. Rukmini always smirked internally when she heard that until one day when she heard someone reply, “Poor motherless daughters. He probably doesn’t know what to do with them.” That wiped the smirk off Rukmini’s face permanently.

Rukmini walked toward her father and all the questions and thoughts in her mind vanished. She didn’t know where to start, so she started with Amman-atta. “Amman-atta came and spoke to me last night.” Babji watched her warily. He didn’t say anything. “She said something about a wedding.” Rukmini swallowed a lump in her throat. Too much was changing around her and she didn’t want to go away from her father’s house and live with strangers. Babji put an arm around her and gently took her to a quiet corner of the house. He sat down on the verandah floor and she sat next to him. They both watched the well for a few seconds.

“Ruku,” Babji began, “yes, you are to be married. It is a very complicated situation but I believe it is the best thing to do right now.”

Rukmini felt another lump forming in her throat. “But I’m seven, not fifteen like, like.... Niru was.” The lump became painful as she said her sister’s name and both the father and daughter flinched.

“Yes, you are younger but I think this is the best thing to do right now. Raman and his father are very nice people. You know that,” Babji turned to look at Rukmini’s face, which she was trying hard not to crumple into tears.

“But I don’t want to leave you,” Rukmini said with her voice breaking.

Babji smiled and put an arm on Rukmini’s still-damp hair. “Mad girl, you are not leaving me. You will get married and stay with me for a few more years. You won’t go to your in-laws’ place right now.”

The lump in Rukmini’s throat eased a little. She didn’t need to go anywhere right away. Babji and Rukmini sat there for a few minutes looking at the well. Rukmini felt better about the wedding and thought, *maybe it won’t be all bad.*

“Why do I have to marry Raman?” Rukmini didn’t understand what a marriage was beyond the wedding, never having seen her parents’ or her sister’s married life closely. She knew she would have to go with Raman and his father Subaiyya to their house. She knew she had to pray for his long life and prosperity or else she would have to wear white all her life and keep her head tonsured. She knew some women have kids while some died in childbirth. She knew the wedding itself was full of nice things and good food. Why does anyone get married, Rukmini wondered but didn’t say aloud.

“Raman is a nice man.” Babji’s eyes became less sad and more focused as he spoke about Raman. “He is well-educated. He is an engineer, you know. He respects elders. Niru

always spoke well of him when I asked her. He was heartbroken over her death but of course he also realises that this is the best thing for us to do right now.” Babji turned to look at his daughter and saw that she understood little of what was going on but was nodding sagely. “You don’t have to worry about any of it now. After the wedding, you’ll be with me for a few years and there is all the time in the world for you to grow up and be the daughter-in-law of their house.”

Rukmini nodded. She trusted Babji’s judgement. If he said it was going to be okay, it probably was going to be okay. Babji got up and stretched his arms. Rukmini quickly stood up to go in with him for their meal, her hunger now abated. The father and daughter with their stooped shoulders and tired hearts walked into the house together.

The next month passed by in a blur of housework and relatives. Rukmini would forget about the upcoming wedding for days at a time, until Amman-atta said something about it.

Rukmini’s world was confined mostly to the house. She hardly saw anything of the sleepy, little village where she lived in. Rukmini missed the weekly visits to their relatives’ houses. Before Niru’s death, every Friday, a few hours after lunch, Babji would take his two daughters to visit with some of their relatives in the village and surrounding villages. Babji, Neerjakshi and Rukmini would sit in the bullock cart, Babji’s legs dangling out the thatched coupe. Rukmini loved these cart rides and she twisted her head in all directions to watch as much as possible. “Can we go past the river, *Nanna?*” Rukmini asked every Friday. Rukmini loved the sound of the water and little boys jumping into the river, hollering at one another. “Can we go past the coconut grove, *Nanna?*” Rukmini asked every Friday. She loved the

breeze that wafted through the coconut grove, and the occasional song of a man up in the trees, throwing coconuts down. “Can we go past the school, *Nanna?*” Rukmini asked every Friday. Rukmini was home-schooled by her father, just barely enough to read and write her mother tongue Telugu. Rukmini loved the sound of the bell, the clatter of many tiny feet and the bustle outside the school. “Rukmini would love to just sit in the cart and go around the village all day,” Niru would say with a tinkling laugh.

After Niru’s death, Rukmini just stayed home. The house emptied of a majority of the relatives but a few people stayed on to help with the wedding. Amman-atta stayed and Rukmini got the impression that she didn’t want to go back to her in-laws’ place ever again. Babji’s cousin Janaki, and her two sons stayed. Janaki was a small, delightful woman. She was less than five feet tall but she was full of smiles and giggles. Her two sons—Gopi and Parthu—were around Rukmini’s age and seldom invited her to play.

Janaki took over the kitchen and Amman-atta gladly let her. In addition to Babji, the servants and routine relatives who were passing through the village, Janaki was cooking for ten people at each meal easily. Janaki routinely cooked for ten people at her in-laws’ house and she remained unfazed. Rukmini would sometimes wander into the kitchen and watch Janaki bustle around, cooking and cleaning. Rukmini wondered what life would be like if her mother didn’t die in childbirth, but she couldn’t imagine much. So Rukmini just pretended that Janaki was her mother for those few minutes in the kitchen and envied Gopi and Parthu for the rest of the day.

One afternoon a sari-seller came to their house with bundles of garments for sale. Rukmini, Amman-atta, Janaki and Babji gathered in their living room. The seller spread his wares out on thick, coarse blankets. There were silk saris of all colours and the rainbow of saris made Rukmini blink rapidly. There was a deep turquoise sari with a silver border,

another bright red sari with golden dots, and a magenta one with a green border. All of them seemed beautiful to Rukmini.

Janaki took over the sari-buying, directing her comments to Babji. "I think Ruku needs three saris. One for the bride-making ceremony, one for the main ceremony and one for the Satyanarayana puja the next day. This is other than the white and gold sari for the thread ceremony," she said. Janaki looked like she knew what she was talking about. Rukmini's head swam with the information; Babji looked grateful that someone else was taking over and Amman-atta sat quietly in a corner, watching the proceedings without saying much.

"Come sit here, Amman-atta," Rukmini said to her, but the older woman just shook her bald head sadly. "No, Ruku. It's bad luck for a widow to touch wedding things. I am fine here," Amman-atta said. Rukmini felt bad for Amman-atta who watched the colourful saris spread out in the living room with hungry eyes.

Janaki decided that Rukmini should get a yellow sari with a green border for the bride making ceremony. Later, Janaki picked out the red one with gold dots and spread it over her body. Rukmini thought it looked good on Janaki and turned to watch Amman-atta's face contort with distaste.

"It's too bright, Janaki," Amman-atta called out from her corner in the room.

"Hmm, is it?" Janaki spread it over her shoulder and the sari-seller held up a mirror for her to look.

"Yeah, it's too bright." Amman-atta huffed, her mouth grimacing as she looked at Janaki.

“I think it looks festive. It’s after all for the bride, she is supposed to look bright and happy.” Janaki continued to look at herself in the mirror and Rukmini thought that Janaki probably wanted the sari for herself.

“Yes, but the bride is seven years old, not a thirty-five-year-old mother of two in case you forgot,” Amman-atta said and this made Janaki drop the sari immediately.

“I also wore a red sari at my own wedding, Amman-atta. It’s not loud. These greens and browns are everyday colours, don’t you think?” Janaki clapped a hand to her mouth softly as soon as she asked the question. Amman-atta flinched and Babji cleared his throat. “The red is certainly nice, but I’m not sure,” he said noncommittally.

Janaki looked horrified. “I didn’t mean that Amman-atta. It just slipped out of my mouth.”

Amman-atta recoiled from the conversation and made herself smaller. She draped her sari tighter over her head and partially turned away from the saris. A second later she said, “What do I know about these things? I’m just a widow who has only worn white saris all her life. That’s probably why the red looks too bright and garish to me. You pick, I’m not going to interfere.”

Janaki looked like she was close to tears.

“Let’s not have all of this inauspicious talk while we are choosing my daughter’s wedding saris,” Babji said. He picked up the red sari and examined it closely. “I think the red is nice.” He kept the sari next to him.

Janaki cleared her throat and said, “We need one more. Rukmini, do you like anything else?”

Rukmini’s eyes roved over the sari bundles and a deeper shade of turquoise than the one they had previously seen caught her eye. It was almost green, but not quite. It had a

golden pattern of peacocks on it and when you moved your hand over the soft silk it looked like the peacocks were dancing on water. Rukmini brought the sari closer to her face and saw that the peacock's eyes were bright red. She looked at her father with the sari in her hand and he nodded.

"I like this one," she said. Janaki took it from her hand and opened it. The sari was mostly plain with the peacocks bordering it. The portion of the sari which was supposed to be draped over her shoulder was a riot of peacocks of all sizes and the golden thread work shone in the late afternoon light. Janaki draped it over Rukmini's shoulder and nudged her to look in the mirror.

Rukmini looked in the mirror and saw her small four-foot six-inch frame bundled awkwardly in the sari. She didn't know how to hold her body so that the sari did not slip off. She looked far more comfortable in her regular long skirt and blouse, but that wasn't appropriate for a bride. She felt older than her seven years and thought that the sari would look beautiful on Niru. She looked at Amman-atta who was looking at her with a smile on her face. Encouraged with the smile, Rukmini asked her how she looked. Amman-atta wiped her prematurely-wrinkled face and said, "Like a little princess bride."

Janaki clapped her hands. Babji also asked the seller for an off-white sari with a red border. Rukmini almost thought that was for Amman-atta but then realised it was the sacred sari that she would need to wear for the thread ceremony. She remembered this from Niru's wedding. They also bought material for blouses with the saris and four cotton in-skirts.

Babji haggled with the sari-seller over the price, as Janaki and Rukmini helped him pack up. Rukmini picked up her four saris and walked over to Amman-atta. "Touch and see how soft they are," Rukmini said and held out her stack of saris, the turquoise one right on

top. Amman-atta looked sadly at her and shook her head. "It's probably best if I don't touch them, Rukmini."

Rukmini took the saris to her closet in her father's room. There was a stack of Niru's saris right on top. Rukmini carefully placed her saris next to them. Her stack was much smaller than Niru's but it made Rukmini happy that they were side by side.