

To Tell or Not to Tell?



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Pinky and Chintu were playing in the garden when their mother called them to say that she had just had some bad news. Their ajji, who lived in the next town, was very ill and so she and their father had to go away for a few days to take care of her. "But don't worry, you will not be alone at home—I have made arrangements for Vanitha aunty to stay with you and take care of you while I am gone."



Vanitha aunty was an old family friend of their mother's and the children had met her only once—so they did not know her too well although their parents had been friends with her for a long time. She arrived the day before Pinky and Chintu's parents left town so that she could get settled in and learn how everything in the house worked. She was a tall lady and Pinky was a little afraid of her tall bun and thick black glasses. But she greeted the children warmly: "So, no problem with your parents being away...I am here and we are going to have a whole of fun together," she said. Pinky and Chintu certainly hoped so.



At first, Vanitha aunty seemed nice. She made the children their favourite



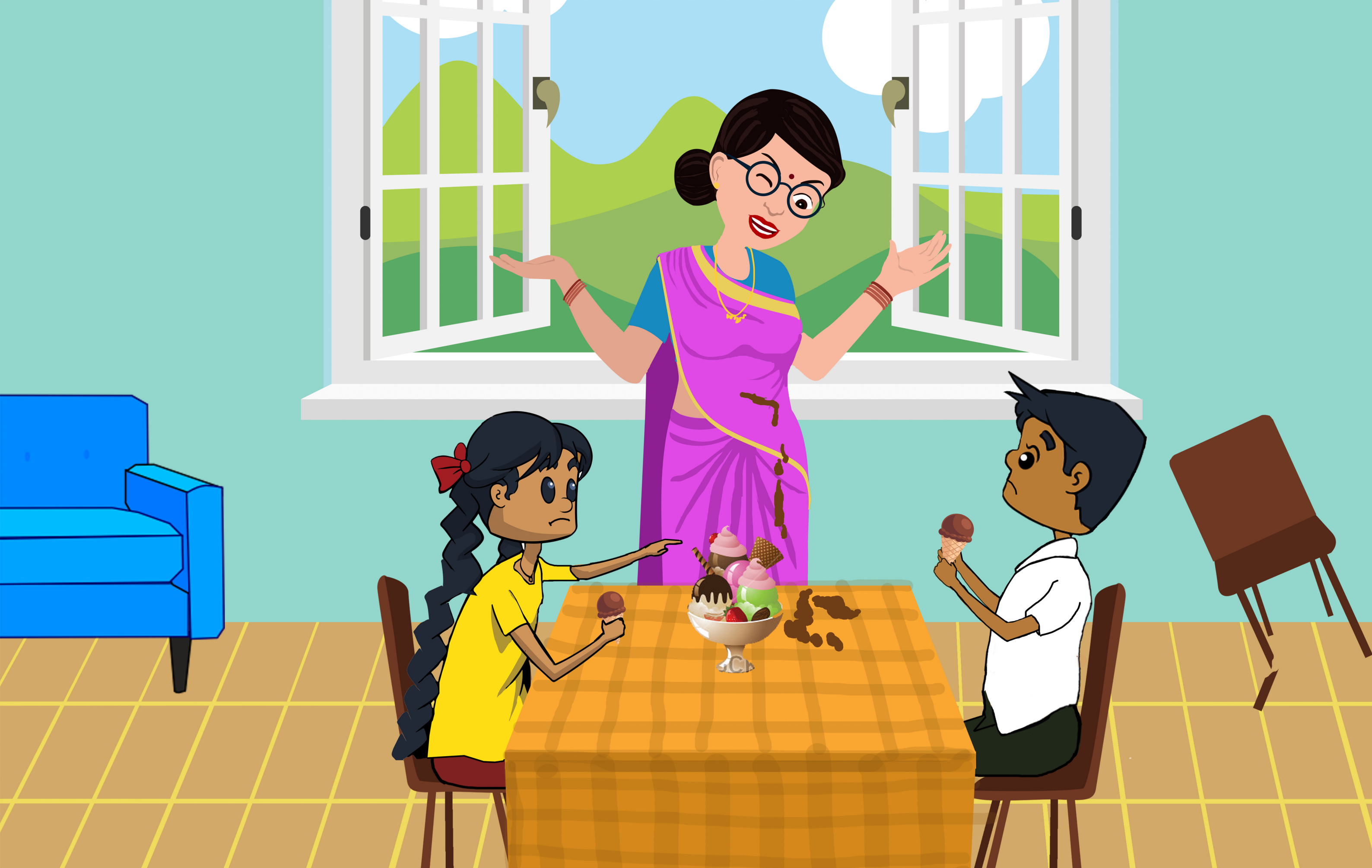
She played board games with them when they got home from school.



But slowly, the children did not feel so sure about her. They returned from school one day to find her wearing their mother's saree. "Oh Amma's favourite pink saree," said Pinky, very surprised. "She usually does not let anyone touch it as she doesn't want it spoiled...how come she let you wear it?"



"O she need not know I wore it," said Vanitha aunty, laughing, and wiping off some sambhar that had dripped onto the delicate sari. "What she does not know, will not hurt her." Pinky and Chintu were puzzled—borrow Amma's favourite sari? Drop food on it and ruin it? Not tell Amma about it?



"And just so you keep our little secret, I have bought you some chocolate ice-cream...which your mother said not to give you in cold weather because you might get a sore throat... but it's ok yaar...you eat some ice-cream and I won't tell Amma that you ate it...just like you won't tell her that I wore her pink saree," said Vanitha aunty, winking.



After eating their ice-cream, the children wanted to go outside to play. "No, no, I want you to wash up everything in the kitchen, not go out and play now," said Vanitha aunty. "After all, I have worked hard to make you dinner."

When Pinky and Chintu pleaded to help with washing up later in the evening, after play time, she got angry and slapped them hard. "Bad children," she said, "you need to learn to obey your elders properly—and just so you remember to do so next time, you are not getting any dinner tonight," she shouted. "And don't you dare tell your parents about any of this—if you do, I will tell them about the ice-cream and they will know how disobedient you have been."



Pinky and Chintu were too afraid to argue. So, they silently washed up in the kitchen and went to bed without any dinner.



"I am hungry," said Pinky.

"Me too," said Chintu. "Amma has been angry with us sometimes but she has never denied us our food. I am going to tell her what Vanitha aunty did."

"But Vanitha aunty is a really good friend of Amma's—they have known each other for so long...do you think Amma will believe us? And what about us eating the chocolate ice-cream? Won't Amma get angry if she knows that we ate some in this weather?"

"Perhaps...I don't know," said Chintu. Sad and confused, they fell asleep.



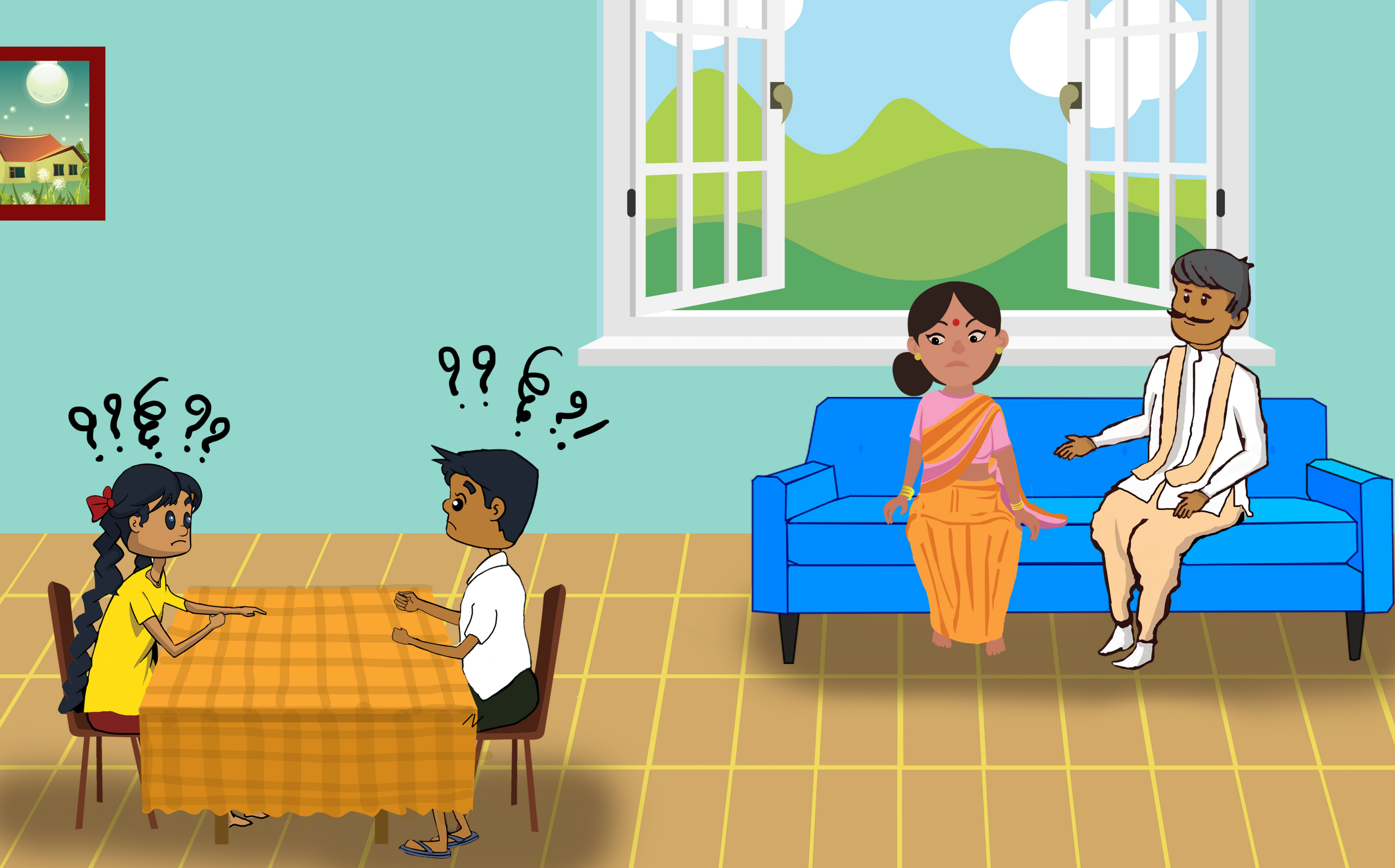
And so, the week went by, with Vanitha aunty often getting angry and making Pinky and Chintu do things that were difficult and unnecessary—like forcing them to wash her clothes, refusing to feed them if they did not clean up the kitchen, stay home with her instead of playing outside. Sometimes she was angry and threatening and other times she was sugar-sweet and promised to buy them treats (like clothes and toys) if they obeyed her. The latter, they noticed, was mostly when she had ruined Appa's furniture or stained Amma's new carpet-- and she told them to keep these things secret from their parents.



Pinky and Chintu were delighted when finally their parents came home and Vanitha aunty left.

"So, I hear that you were very good children," said their father.

"Yes, Vanitha aunty said she loved being with you...so much so that in case Ajji falls ill again, she said she would be happy to come back and look after you," said Amma.



Pinky and Chintu were silent, unsure of whether to tell Amma and Appa about Vanitha aunty and her secrets. But when they said nothing, and Amma and Appa noticed that they looked afraid, and Amma said, "Is there something you want to tell me? Why do you look so scared?"



And then, Pinky and Chintu could not keep the secrets any more—they told their parents everything...about Amma's pink saree and the chocolate ice-cream...



About Vanitha aunty's slapping them and not giving them dinner, making them wash clothes, and her other threats...and then, her promises to buy them treats for keeping her secrets. Amma and Appa listened in amazement.



"Why did you not tell us all this when we called everyday to check how you were doing?" asked Appa.

"Because we were scared you would be angry about us eating the chocolate ice-cream...and we were scared Vanitha aunty would be angry if we told you," said Pinky.

"And we thought you might not believe us since Amma and Vanitha aunty are such good friends," said Chintu.

"We would always believe you, no matter what, so you can tell us anything you like—especially if someone hurts you or does cruel things," said Amma. "We are so glad you told us now...I will deal with Vanitha aunty."

"We thought that Vanitha aunty was a good person, especially since we have known her so long...but we were wrong...we did not know," said Appa. "Anyone who tells you to do bad, dishonest things like Vanitha aunty did is a bad person...only a bad person would ask you to keep secrets about bad things done...and either threaten you if you don't keep the secret or bribe you with sweets and toys."

Chintu and Pinky, who had always thought that secrets were good and fun things now understood that bad and untrustworthy people can sometimes make you keep secrets that are bad—because they are hurtful to us or to others.



The next day, Amma said: "Hey Chintu and Pinky...Appa and I have a surprise for you...pack your bags, we are going to the beach for the week end!"

Pinky and Chintu shouted with joy...they loved the beach! "Wow, how come you didn't tell us that before?" asked Pinky, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Because it was a secret...Appa and I wanted to surprise you and reward you for being so good while we were away to take care of Ajji," said Amma smiling.

"A secret-surprise," sang Chintu running to pack his swimsuit.

"A good secret," Appa reminded them, "because no one was angry, no one shouted and threatened or told others to do bad or hurtful things...a happy secret and surprise."

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